Isaac Asimov TIME IS OUT OF JOINT

THE MAGAZINE OF Fantasy & Science Fiction

FEBRUARY

MAUREEN BIRNBAUM AT THE EARTH'S CORE
by George Alec Effinger

Marion Zimmer Bradley
Wayne Wightman
Russell Griffin

0 58370 02
716585

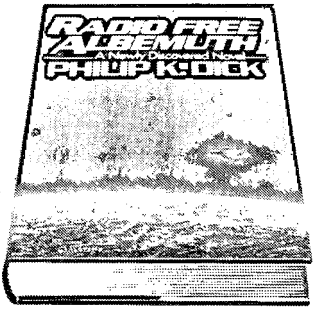
$1.75 U.S. • Canada $2.00 • UK £ 1.80

ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ARBOR HOUSE SCIENCE FICTION

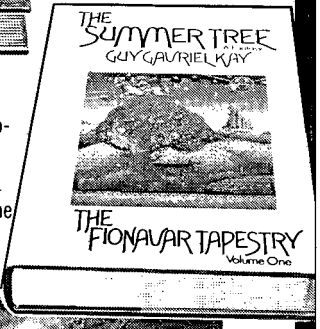
an important program dedicated to the best in new science fiction and fantasy

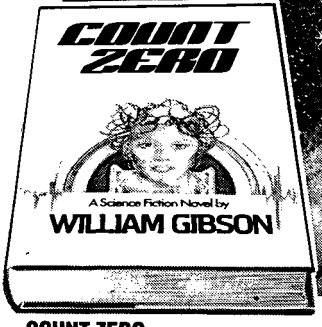
MYTHAGO WOOD
Robert Holdstock
"A deep and highly original novel" (*Fantasy Review*), a dark and mythic fantasy based on a World Fantasy Award nominee short story.
$14.95 0-87795-716-4
November

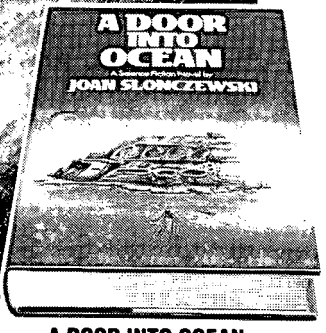


RADIO FREE ALBEMUTH
Philip K. Dick
Set in an alternate, contemporary, politically repressed America, this is a complete, newly discovered (and never-before-published) novel by the late great Philip K. Dick, one of the giants of the genre.
$14.95 0-87795-762-2 January

THE SUMMER TREE
Guy Gavriel Kay
The first volume of the Fionavar Tapestry, a major fantasy trilogy by the co-editor of *The Silmarillion*.
"A splendid new writer."
—*Locus Magazine* $15.95
0-87795-760-6 October







COUNT ZERO
William Gibson
Pyrotechnics from a dazzling young superstar—a new novel set in the same future universe as his multi-award-winning *Neuromancer*.
$15.95 0-87795-769-X March
And coming in April: *Burning Chrome*: The Collected Short Stories of William Gibson.

ARBOR HOUSE
235 East 45th Street, New York 10017
A division of the Hearst Corporation

A DOOR INTO OCEAN
Joan Slonczewski
In the powerful tradition of *Dune*, a brilliant, provocative novel of a unique planetary ecosystem, an ocean world —and the religious war fought there.
$17.95 0-87795-763-0 February

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

STEVEN BRUST
returns to the world of
Jhereg and Yendi for his most
spellbinding adventure of all

BROKEDOWN PALACE

Bestselling fantasy author Steven Brust returns to the world he created in *Jhereg* for a tale of exile and return centered on the strangest palace since Gormenghast—and the most intriguing band of battling princes ever to pick a quarrel, slay a dragon, confound a wizard, or seek the advice of a talking horse.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

STAROAMER'S FATE
Chuck Rothman

LONELINESS OR FREEDOM

Space salvager, planet tamer, dreamstone thief, revolutionary—Quarnian was a woman with a destiny: a gold star syron gifted with the ability to "know" the future and to see into the hearts and minds of others. But the very talent that let her bend others to her will was also the curse that made her a lone adventurer, called by some inner voice to world after world, challenge after challenge.

Now destiny was again calling Quarnian...this time to a rendezvous with a long-lost legend—and a journey of discovery that could change the fate of all who roam the skies...

0-445-20102-9/$2.95
(In Canada: 0-445-20103-7/$3.95)

Questar
Science Fiction/Science Fantasy
AT BOOKSTORES EVERYWHERE
POPULAR LIBRARY

Dushau Trilogy #3
OUTREACH
Jacqueline Lichtenberg

LOVE AND DEATH

On a lonely distant planet, a colony desperately struggles to survive, dependent on its life-saving mental link to the near-immortal Dushau. But now that connection is threatened. The Dushau, "Ciliat" is dangerously close to Renewal, a sexually active state that cancels telepathic abilities. Can the Dushau hold off Renewal until the colony is more firmly established? Or will the deepening bond between Jindigar and Krinata, the first human ever to link minds with an immortal, jeopardize the existence of the last Dushau in the universe?

0-445-20140-1/$2.95
(In Canada: 0-445-20141-X/$3.95)

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Fantasy & Science Fiction

Including VENTURE SCIENCE FICTION

FEBRUARY • 37th Year of Publication

NOVELETS

THE METAPHYSICAL GUN	31	**Wayne Wightman**
THE WANDERING LUTE	88	**Marion Zimmer Bradley**

SHORT STORIES

MAUREEN BIRNBAUM AT THE EARTH'S CORE	6	**George Alec Effinger**
MEMORIES OF GWYNNETH	55	**Jennifer Black**
WE CALL THEM FLOWERS	67	**Lynn Marron**
ME AND MY SHADOW	81	**Larry Eisenberg**
LO, HOW AN OAK E'ER BLOOMING	109	**Suzette Haden Elgin**
OBSERVATIONS ON SIRENIAN SINGING	121	**Jerrie W. Hurd**
THE ROAD KING	146	**Russell Griffin**

DEPARTMENTS

BOOKS	22	**Algis Budrys**
HARLAN ELLISON'S WATCHING	118	**Harlan Ellison**
SCIENCE: Time Is Out of Joint	135	**Isaac Asimov**

CARTOONS: HENRY MARTIN (117), SIDNEY HARRIS (134), JOSEPH DAWES (160)

COVER BY G. P. LENDINO FOR "MAUREEN BIRNBAUM AT THE EARTH'S CORE"

EDWARD L. FERMAN, Editor & Publisher
DALE FARRELL, Circulation Manager
ALGIS BUDRYS, Book Review Editor
ISAAC ASIMOV, Science Columnist
AUDREY FERMAN, Business Manager
ANNE JORDAN, Managing Editor
Assistant Editors: MARGARET COOLEY, DAVID MICHAEL BUSKUS

The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction (ISSN: 0024-984X), Volume 70, No. 2, Whole No. 417, Feb. 1986. Published monthly by Mercury Press, Inc. at $1.75 per copy. Annual subscription $19.50; $23.50 outside of the U.S. (Canadian subscribers: please remit in U.S. dollars or add 30%.) Postmaster: send form 3579 to Fantasy and Science Fiction, Box 56 Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Publication office, Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Second class postage paid at Cornwall, Conn. 06753 and at additional mailing offices. Printed in U.S.A.

Copyright © 1985 by Mercury Press, Inc. All rights, including translations into other languages, reserved. Submissions must be accompanied by stamped, self-addressed envelope. The publisher assumes no responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Maureen "Muffy" Birnbaum is a spunky prep school graduate who made her first appearance in our January 1982 issue. In this new adventure, Maureen is a bit older, putting on a little heftiness, hip-wise, but still a fighting woman with all the right moves, which can be useful when dealing with ape-men. . .

Maureen Birnbaum at the Earth's Core

(as told to Bitsy Spiegelman)

BY
GEORGE ALEC EFFINGER

All I know is that I was supposed to leave for Cancún. The plane was at two, and you know what traffic is like in the sleet to the airport, so I was planning to leave the apartment sometime around noon to get there and get my bags checked through and have enough time to pour three or four drinks into me. I do not like to fly — it doesn't matter if the plane is coming down in Aspen or Cancún or Oz. I do not like to fly. *The four drinks wouldn't calm me either, unless they were washing down five of the big Valiums, the baby blue ones, whatever they are. Tens, I think.*

Anyway. *I'd packed two days before and checked everything at least twice, had my passport and my tickets in my purse with cab fare in case my sweet little RX-7 perished heroically somewhere on the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway, and I was all set to start hauling my bags out to the car, when guess what? The phone rang. My mother, I figured. It's always my mother. Mums would be calling to let me know the latest herpes statistics or something, so I just let it ring. It rang and rang and rang. I had all the luggage in the car, and the goddamn telephone was* still *ringing. Mums rings only ten times. So I answered it.* I go, *"'Hello?" And I was in a real rush because I had only two hours to get maybe twelve miles on the best highway system in the Free World.*

"Bitsy?" goes this girl's voice.

"Look, I really have to run. Got to catch a plane. Call me next week, we'll have lunch."

"Bitsy? This is Maureen. Muffy."

I could have died just standing there with the phone against my ear.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

It was Maureen Birnbaum, giving me a little call on January 15, 1985, exactly four years to the day since she last disappeared. I didn't know what to say to her for a moment. "Muffy," I managed at last, "you still owe my mother four hundred dollars."

"I meant to talk to you about that. Can I see you? It's awfully important, I mean really."

Four years ago she'd shown up in midtown Manhattan wearing a couple of square inches of gold lamé and carrying an honest-to-God sword. She'd just gotten back from Mars, you see. After she gave me her absolutely incredible story, she'd vanished for four solid years, without so much as a note or a card. Now she wanted to catch up on old times and tell me more about Mars and stuff and the beautiful prince she'd fallen in love with. "Listen, Muffy," I go, "it would be, like, great, except I was just going out the door. Club Med, you know. I've saved up all year for this, you know?"

"Bitsy." There was this creepiness in her voice that she'd get sometimes when we were roommates back at the Greenberg School, whenever I suggested — in a kind and helpful way, I mean — that she might be putting on a little heftiness, hip-wise.

It was a traumatic moment for me. I felt this dreadful sinking feeling. What could I do?

I'll tell *you what I did: I went to Cancún, met a dentist from Boston with a face you'd claw your way to get up close to, had a pretty neat time broiling on the sand there with him for a week, found out the last day that he was married, got a couple of little* tchatchkes *to remember him by because he was feeling so impure and all, and came home. There was a cassette tape sitting on Mum's copy of an Erma Bombeck book she'd lent me to make me feel even guiltier about being her child. I played the tape. Just like the last time, you have your choice of believing any of this or not. A lot* I *care.*

Bitsy? Bitsy, how do you start — is it running? Is this, like, working? Let me run it back—

It's working. Great. So how the hell *are* you, sweetie? I hope you're having a really cruddy time in Mexico, because I went through absolute *hell* to see you, and you leave me to toast your buns in the sun.

The last time you saw me, I had on my new clothes and all the rest were packed in the Louis Vuitton bag. I planned to stay in the hotel until about midnight; then I was going to sneak outside, look up in the sky and find Mars, raise my supple, beseeching, cashmere-clad arms to the God of War, and whush my way back to Prince Van. You *must* remember me telling you about Prince Van. I had already figured out how I was going to play him: vivacious, exciting, yet,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

you know, *cool*. I'll never forget that gaggy feeling I got when I found out that people on Mars don't know what a ***relationship*** is. I was going to have to teach them. I mean ***him***. The rest of them could go on living like animals — *I* should worry?

Ten o'clock, eleven o'clock — I had a glass of white wine in the bar and talked with this so-so guy who said he was a production assistant; but he wouldn't ever come out and tell me exactly what he assisted producing. About a quarter to midnight, I flashed him my number three smile — Glamorous But Not Inviting — and told him I had to powder my nose. I raced back up to the room, grabbed my bag, and hurried back down to the lobby. It was right then that I realized I didn't have Dime One left over to pay the bill, so I kissed it off and kept the key. They'll either charge Daddy or God will send me to hell, ha ha.

I realized that I couldn't see much of the sky from that part of town, and the only open place I could think of was Central Park. That's cute, isn't it? Maureen Birnbaum, the Marie Osmond of Long Island, walking alone into the treacherous wastes of Central Park at midnight. Alone, but not unarmed — see, I still had Old Betsy, and if any mugger in that park tried anything funny with me, he'd come home from work with one or two important parts hacked off his goddam body.

So Central Park it had to be. Except — can you believe it? — it was raining. I mean, *pouring*. You couldn't see the top of the Empire State Building, let alone Mars. Oh, fudge, I said to myself, and I went back into the hotel. I took my bag up to the room, then came back down to the bar and let the production assistant buy me a drink. I told the bartender I wanted a piña colada, and he goes, "A what?" Like he'd never heard of it before or nobody drank them anymore. He gave me a look like I was from another planet or something. Well, of course, I ***did*** just get back from another planet; but that wasn't really any reason for this measly bartender to make me feel like a social leper, for God's sake. He smirked to himself like I'd ordered some kind of drink that you hear about only in works of literature, like a martini or a mint julep or something. And then he goes, "I'm sorry, miss, but we took all the disco off the jukebox a long time ago." And the production assistant thought that was pretty funny too. Then he had the nerve — the prod. ass., I mean — to suggest we go someplace else, in *the Bronx* yet! So I told him I had to get up early because I had to go donate a kidney, and went to my room and watched TV.

There is nothing more boring ***in the whole world*** than killing time. The whole next day I might as well have been socked in at some airport or something, because getting to Mars

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

was going to have to wait until after dark. I tried a little window shopping, but how much fun is that when you don't have any cash and all your credit cards are probably lying in an abandoned ski suit somewhere in Vermont? I mean, even if you don't intend to spend money, you spend money — it's a law of nature or something. When you know you absolutely, positively *can't,* well, it's like running out of gas in the dark, romantic woods late at night with Father Flanagan. I mean, why *torture* yourself, you know?

I called Daddy, but he and Pammy were out of town too, I remembered. They went to St. Croix when they sent me to Mad River Glen. I'd been to Mars and back, but they were probably still down in the sun and fun. I was all alone. I was *penniless.* I was beginning to feel like I'd accidentally been erased by The Big Computer or something. So I watched more TV and sent down to room service for food and put it on the bill.

I didn't wait for midnight. I went out about seven o'clock when it got dark, and it wasn't raining! Hooray! A point for me. I looked up in the sky, and I saw maybe three stars. That's all. People in New York don't realize there're a whole lot of stars they're missing out on. New York kids must be scared out of their punky, wiseass little minds if they ever get out into the country and look up at the night sky. "Hey, what the hell are *those?*" they go. "Stars," somebody tells 'em. "Nuh-uh. How come we don't got that many on 125th Street?" they go. "Because that's God punishing you for covering all the subway cars with spray paint."

I have become aware of social problems, Bitsy, believe it or not. You'll hear all about it. In the past four years, I've learned a lot about right and wrong. I'm dead set against certain things now. For one, I'm not Muffy anymore. No, no way, Monet. I'm Maureen and I'm proud of it. Maureen's my name, my real name. Muffy was my slave name. It's what all those Columbia math majors called me. No more, kiddo.

And you've changed a little too, haven't you? I looked around for something to drink — no vodka, no rum, no tequila. That's not the old Blitzy-Bitsy Spiegelman *I* remember. A little new Beaujolais in the kitchen and some classy-looking whites — you've been reading those *magazines* again, honey. And that picture on the table — *Bitsy!* For crying out loud, do you realize you've cut your hair exactly the same way as my mother's *Lhasa apso?* And what's with the funky, stretched-out sweatshirt hanging off your shoulder? You look like you can't afford your own clothes and have to go raid the Goodwill boxes at night. Times change, I guess. From looking around, I think I want to get out of here *real* fast. But, as your mother says, "As long as you've got your health." I notice you don't have

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the Captain and Tennille records I gave you anymore. The Knack and Shaun Cassidy albums are missing too; now there are a few *black faces* peeping out of your stereo cabinet. Why, Bitsy, how sophisticated of you! Our tastes just keep on broadening, don't they? Is this the kid with the sunglasses and the glittery glove the one who sings with his brothers? He still doesn't look old enough to be let out by himself. I mean, his *voice* hasn't changed or anything.

Where was I? Oh, yeah. Well, I went to Central Park and looked for the darkest, loneliest place I could find. I don't know, maybe it was the sight of me with my genuine leather bag in one hand and a long, jeweled sword in the other, but nobody bothered me. Somewhere around Sixty-eighth Street, I looked up into the sky again. There were more stars here — about *six* more. I hoped one of those dots of light was Mars. I clutched my bag and my sword, closed my eyes tighty-tight, and projected myself headlong into space. It's a trick you learn. The first time is just an accident, but then you stumble on how to do it whenever you want. You just sort of throw yourself across this creepy-cold distance between Earth and, like, wherever.

Steering is another matter entirely, honey, let me tell you. *Forget* what they've told you; it's *not* all in the wrist. I mean, when I tried to get from Mars to Vermont, I ended up in Manhattan. This time, trying to whush myself back to Mars, I ended up—

You're not going to believe this—

I landed inside the hollow Earth.

Don't ask me how I could aim at the sky and land five hundred miles below the dead brown grass of Central Park. I'm not sure. And you're going to have to forget (if you haven't already) all about Mr. Reuven's lectures about the Earth's crust and the mantle and the molten core and so on and on. I knew I was *inside,* because there was rock all around and above me where the sky should be, and the far, hazy distances lifted up to meet the roof. Overhead there was some kind of blazing little sun that never went out — it was always daytime; but it was the kind of light that makes you look like you've been dead for a week. It wasn't like real sunlight. I was there for four years and I didn't get the beginning of a tan, even though I didn't wear any more clothes than I did on Mars.

I was in the middle of a big forest — a jungle, really, and the trees were covered with hanging vines and bright, beautiful flowers climbing up the trunks. Orchids, I think, though they were shaped funny and were strange colors. Everything in this place was shaped funny, I came to realize, and was a funny color. I wandered around in the jungle for a little while, just staring at the birds and monkeys and butterflies and flowers. It was *hot.* Let me tell you, it was as hot as

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

your mother's apartment was that Fourth of July when your A.C. went out and you couldn't get anybody to come fix it on the holiday. I was sweating the proverbial bullets. I said to myself, I go, "Muffy" — see, I wasn't socially aware yet; it took four years of suffering and hardship to teach me those lessons — I go, "Muffy, you know what would be nice? Let's change into something a little cooler." I had in mind a pair of khaki shorts and a Ralph Lauren polo shirt and my old Tretorn tennis sneaks. So I opened my suitcase and took off my winter stuff — you have to picture this in your mind, Bitsy, step-by-step — and I was rummaging around, looking for the right outfit, when out from behind this tree stepped this ape.

Well, I screamed. *You'd* scream too. I was naked. I'd never *been* naked in front of an ape before.

He galumphed toward me with his knuckles on the ground, carrying some dead animal in his mouth. Behind him came maybe twenty more apes. I told myself not to be terrified; I'd faced bigger monsters on Mars, and these huge old monkeys were probably just as scared of me as I was of them. That's what they always say on TV. Marlin Perkins is always going, like, "These huge old monkeys of the deep jungle look fearsome, but in truth they are gentle browsers and vegetarians." Then I thought, Why the hell does it have this dead *thing* in its mouth if it's a vegetarian?

I stood very still, wishing I could reach down and pick up my sword, Old Betsy, but I didn't dare move. The big ape came right up to me and stopped. He stared at me and, believe me, sweetie, I didn't like the evil red eyes he'd got set into his flat little head. They were going up and down my body like I was Miss Anthropoid of 1980. I heard Marlin Perkin's voice in my head again: "These harmless cousins of ours are curious by nature, and will rape and pillage anything in their path."

Well, I stood still until that goddamn ape slowly reached out a hand, just like in *2001,* and almost grabbed my boob.

Nobody grabs my boob. That's when I went for the sword. *Whip,* I was standing straight and fierce and beautiful, ready to defend my honor if I had to skewer all twenty of them. The ape gave me this beady stare. Then it goes *ptui* and spit out the dead animal. "What are you doing in Yag-Nash's territory?" he goes. In pretty good English, yet (with just a touch of a regional accent, but let's not get snobby). I'd been astonished to find that people on Mars spoke English. Now these apes or ape-men or whatever they were did the same thing. Don't ask me to explain it: I'm just a fighting woman.

I go, "Nothing. I come in peace." I took it that this was Yag-Nash himself I was dealing with.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Another of these talking Neanderthals came up and looked me over, the same as Yag-Nash had, and goes, "Let's kill the she now. The little feathered snake will not feed the whole tribe." It kicked at the scruffy dead thing on the ground.

"No," goes Yag-Nash, "the she will not die. The tribe of Yag-Nash has had bad hunting since the death of the High Priestess. This beautiful she will be our new High Priestess." All the other hairy, ugly brutes opened their eyes wide and started going, "Ohhhhh."

"Thank you for saving my life," I go.

"Don't mention," goes Yag-Nash. They were real Missing Links, Bitsy. I wish they'd stayed Missing.

I breathed a little easier, but I didn't lower my sword. Something I learned on Mars: don't trust anybody except handsome princes; *especially* don't trust horrible blechy things from *The Twilight Zone*. I didn't like being all pink and perky and undressed in front of these hairballs, but I couldn't get my clothes on and keep them covered at the same time. My problem was solved for me by ol' Yag-Nash, the leader of the pack.

"Bring her along to the caves," he goes. And the twenty of them swarmed all over me, and grabbed my arms and legs and lifted me off the ground. I hung on to Old Betsy, but she didn't do me any good, you know? I didn't have a chance to get in a good whack at any of them. They kept up this weirdo moaning chant as they carried me through the jungle. I twisted my head a little, and I saw that none of them had thought to bring along my suitcase. Good-bye, new outfits; good-bye *Je Reviens*. And after all that hard shopping we did too. I never *did* get to wear any of that stuff.

When we got to their place — it was like this cliff with caves poked into it like the little holes in a slice of rye bread — they carried me up to the main cave. I don't know how they climbed that cliff. It sure looked sheer and smooth to me. But then, *I* don't have arms that swing down below my knees, or fighting fangs either. We human beings have lost a little something to make up for what we've gained on our long March Toward Civilization. Thank the Lord.

When they deposited me on the floor of the main cave — *ba-WHUMP* — Yag-Nash gestured and the rest of them left in a hurry. He looked down at me with those cruddy little beady eyes of his. He drooled, Bitsy, he really *drooled*. Like my uncle Jerry.

I go, "You didn't bring my clothes along. You have anything here for me to wear?"

His expression went blank for a second, then he must have had what passed for an idea in his little peabrain. "I will garb you with the richness and finery of our last High Priestess," he goes. "You will like Yag-Nash

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

then. You will be *grateful.*"

"You bet," I go. I shuddered a little.

The boss ape hustled out on his short, bowed legs. I had a few minutes to myself, but so what? The main cave was huge, but it didn't lead anywhere and I couldn't climb down that cliff by myself. I was trapped up there. I clutched old Betsy and waited. A little while later my pal came back, carrying a double armload of stuff. He dropped it all at my feet. "What's that?" I go.

"Wear," he goes instructively.

I sorted through the stuff. At first it looked like a hopeless mess of tangled braids and straps. I couldn't make heads or tails out of it. I carried it all to the light at the mouth of the cave and I gasped, like. Bitsy, it was all *gold and jewels!* I mean, *all* of it! There was this bra kind of thing with dangling golden loops and chains and thingies hooked up front to back and all, and a sexy little G-string of gold with a thin little gold hip-band. Wow, if I'd have had that stuff on some football weekend up in New Haven . . . ! And the gold was just lousy with jewels. *Covered* with jewels, all emeralds, some as big as a quarter. "This is for *me?*" I go.

"Wear," Yag-Nash goes. He was the strong, silent type.

I put it on. Well, gold is nice to look at and appraise and all, but it's not much fun to live in. The bra wasn't lined or anything, and the metal edges dug into my skin. The girl who had it before me must have been two full cup-sizes smaller, 'cause my boobs were all squashed together and hauled up almost to my shoulders. Did *terrific* things for my cleavage, but it was uncomfortable as all hell. And the metal G-string was *cold.* Yipe.

"Good," goes Yag-Nash, when I had, uh, garbed myself.

"Glad you like it," I go. "*Now* what?"

"We hunt again tomorrow. Before we hunt, you must pray to the Great Rock-Sky God!"

"Sure," I said. I knew that was breaking some Commandment or something, but desperate times call for desperate measures.

"Now you sleep."

I go, "I'm not tired. I'll wait until tonight."

"What do you mean, 'night'?"

Then I realized, like, it wasn't *ever* going to get dark. The little sun in the middle of the Earth never set. So much for sneaking away after the sun went down, as if there was anywhere to sneak *to.* I stretched out on the cave floor — it was just crawling with bugs and spiders, of course — and after a while, I don't know how long, I went to sleep.

I had a surprise when I woke up. Yag-Nash had shackled my right ankle and chained me to the wall. "Great," I thought, "that's all I need." Like it made any difference; though before, at least I had the *illusion* of freedom.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I still had my sword. The only thing I could figure was that Yag-Nash didn't recognize Old Betsy as a weapon. He may never have seen a sword before. I hoped I could make him more familiar with it Real Soon Now.

Hours later, I suppose, Yag-Nash came back into the cave huffing and puffing from the climb up the rock face. "It is time, O High Priestess," he goes.

"Well," I thought, "*every* High Priestess has to start sometime." Yag-Nash held something in his hand. His attitude was different now: he was respectful, almost timid. I looked at what he was offering me — it was a big golden crown set with emeralds and huge diamonds. I could have bought Massachusetts, furnished, with that, for God's sake. I took it and plopped it on my head. Then Yag-Nash threw me over his shoulder without a word, not so much as "excuse me, Exalted One," and started down the cliff. I shut my eyes and practiced praying.

There was a sort of flat altar made of roughly shaped rock, about a hundred yards into the jungle. The rest of the tribe — I guess there were about a hundred in all — was spread through the big clearing, and they were all chanting and grunting and jumping up and down on their knuckles. It was *disgusting*. Yag-Nash walked into the middle of the clearing, by this altar thing, and raised his furry arms. "Silence!" he goes.

There was silence.

Then it was *my* turn. I went up to the altar and looked around at my congregation. I put a stern look on my face — see, I figured from Yag-Nash's change in attitude that as High Priestess I was some big hoo-ha now, and I wanted to see how far I could push it. "First off," I go in a kind of cop voice, loud and commanding, "I don't want you to call me the High Priestess. 'Priestess' is a sexist label. I won't have any of that. You will call me Reverend Maureen."

The Neanderthals nodded their huge, lumpy heads. "Mo-reen," they murmured.

"That's fine. Now as I understand it, you're about to go on another hunt today. I will say a prayer for your success. I will invoke the blessing of the Great Rock-Sky God on you. I will bring you meat for your hungry, hairy bellies. You will treat me with deference."

"Mo-reen," they all go.

"Damn right." Then I went into the prayer, something like, "Heavenly Father, we are gathered here together to ask your blessing on our hunters. Today they go out in search of food for their shes and their young ones. Game is scarce, and the animals are fleet of foot or cunning. Our hunters are neither, and they are armed only with these cruddy stone knives that couldn't stab their way through a wet newspaper. What's more, our hunters don't have the largest cranial

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

capacities, if you know what I mean—and *they don't,* or I'd be in trouble now. Therefore, we ask that you make it easy on them. A few deer or something trapped in a tar pit would be nice. I don't expect miracles, but look, *I* get hungry too, right? I guess that's about all. Thanking you in advance, this is Reverend Maureen, signing off."

"Amen," murmured the cavemen.

Yag-Nash goes, "You pray good, Mo-Reen. You are a good High — I mean, a good Reverend."

I shrugged. "It's a gift," I go. "I will bring you much meat. I will end hunger and want among the tribe of Yag-Nash."

"Good," he goes.

"And you will treat me well."

The pot-bellied old creep gave me that slimy squint again. "You will like the way Yag-Nash treats you," he goes. I doubted that very seriously. He grabbed me and carted me out of the clearing, back to the main cave and the shackle and chain. I complained, but it didn't do any good. And he took the crown, too. *That's* the kind of man I attract, Bitsy, ain't it the truth? He left me in the cave all alone, secured to the wall. From far away I could hear the shouts of the hunters as they worked themselves up into a sweat.

Well, this kind of thing went on for one hell of a long time. They'd feed me and bring me water, but that was all. No washing, no exercise, *nothing.* I was wasting away. Every couple of "days," Yag-Nash would carry in the crown and trundle me down the cliff to the altar, where I said a prayer and everybody acted subdued and courteous for a few minutes. Then it was back to the cave and the chain and Maureen Birnbaum, Prisoner of Love. The funny thing was, the hunters *did* have better luck. They came back with lots of meat, or else I suppose they'd have killed — and maybe eaten — *me.* I figure that's what happened to the last High Priestess. Yucko. The hunters brought back these big old reindeer and musk oxen and things. I mean, animals you don't find walking around the woods on the surface anymore. The reindeer and the oxen were *gigantic.* They were prehistoric animals, just like Yag-Nash and his crew. I knew that for sure when they brought in the woolly mammoth. You could tell it wasn't just a plain old elephant: it was a *mammoth.* And they killed other weird critters too: saber-toothed tigers and beavers the size of bears and sloths as big as hippos. But my congregation had a lot to learn about the fine points of the culinary arts: *Cuisine Primitif,* you know, the Food of the Clods. Fire-blackened here and there on the outside, bloody raw on the inside. I was hungry all the time, so I got to where I liked it that way.

After this went on for many months—I filled up the wall as far as I could

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

reach with "daily" scratches — Yag-Nash came into the cave in a real dither. I'd kept him away from me by telling him that if he put one paw on my reverend bod, the Great Rock-Sky God would punish him by driving away all the game. Yag-Nash was hungry more often than he was horny, so I didn't have to worry about him except when his dim bulb of a brain forgot my threat. When he came in all excited, I figured, "Here we go again."

I was wrong. He goes, "We have captured an enemy."

This was some news. I mean, I didn't even *know* there was another tribe anywhere nearby. "Uh-huh," I go.

"It is a morthak, not like Yag-Nash and his people. You must sacrifice it to the Great Rock-Sky God."

"Sacrifice?" Bitsy, I can't even bring myself to squish a goddamn *cockroach.* On Mars I lopped some heads off these big green men, but that was purely self-defense. Cutting out hearts on an altar is something else. I didn't know what a morthak was, but whatever it was, I didn't think I could kill one.

"The morthak must die," Yag-Nash goes, "or *you* will take its place."

Well, on second thought, maybe this prehistoric world *could* get along without a crummy morthak one way or the other.

Yag-Nash gave me the glitzy crown and I put it on, then he unlocked me and tossed me over his shoulder and we made our way down the cliff. I'd gotten pretty used to it by now, you know? I didn't have to close my eyes anymore. I even kept up a pleasant stream of chatter. I mean, I didn't have all that many "people" to talk to. Not that Yag-Nash was the most scintillating conversationalist. His idea of a snappy comeback was "Gruh!"

I had another surprise waiting for me when we got to my altar. A "morthak" turned out to be like a good-looking boy with a fearless smile to *die* for. I *mean* it, Bitsy. This guy made Prince Van look like Ernest Borgnine or something. He wasn't blond and he didn't have blue eyes, but you can't have *everything.* He was wearing this navy blue jumpsuit, so I knew he probably came from up on the surface too. In all the time I'd been in the center of the Earth, I hadn't seen anybody else like me. A *person,* you know? So I stood beside the altar where they had this gorgeous specimen tied down, and I go, "Where did you go to school?"

He looked at me all surprised. "Nathanael West High in New York," he goes.

I was a little disappointed. I go, "Oh, like a *public school* kid." Well, *everybody* can't go to Andover or Exeter or Lawrenceville. I mean, there are probably rich and powerful corporation executives who started out in some public school system and showed a lot of potential and made their way on smarts and ambition.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

But, see, I wasn't interested in a guy with just *promise*. I was looking for somebody who had more to fall back on than a cute little tush.

"You know of the world I come from?" he goes.

I had to laugh. "*I* come from the world you come from," I go. "If I was still there and hadn't had these adventures and everything, I'd be a senior at the Greenberg School."

He goes, "I have a sort of friend whose sister goes to the Greenberg School."

"Oh, really?" I go. "What's her name?"

"Jennifer Freeman. She's a sophomore."

"Oh, well," I go, drawing myself up kind of haughtily, "we don't hang out with the *sophomores.*"

My name is Rod Marquand," he goes. "I'm pleased to meet you."

"I'm—"

I was rudely interrupted by Yag-Nash. He pushed this golden knife into my hands and growled, "Kill."

"What?" I go. "*Him?*"

"Kill."

"Hey, look. I thought he was going to be this *morthak* or something. I can't kill a live human being."

"Kill him or die yourself."

This Rod guy goes, "Go ahead, then, young lady. If *that's* the situation, please, save yourself. I'll die happily, knowing that you're safe." What a sweet, brave boy. If only he didn't go to public school.

"I can't do that," I go.

Yag-Nash was furious. "Take them both back to the cave!" And the tribe grabbed us and hauled us up to the main cave. I was shackled and Rod was tied up hand and foot. Just before he left, Yag-Nash turned to me and goes, "You'll die a horrible death, Mo-Reen. You will fill the belly of Yag-Nash!" And he laughed, sort of. It was *awful.*

When we were alone, Rod looked at me and smiled. "Thanks for not killing me," he goes.

"You're very welcome, I'm sure. Look where it got me."

"Don't be alarmed, miss. I'll get us out of here. I came here in an atomic subterrine. We'll escape in that."

"What is it?" I go. It sounded like a tiny soup bowl that ran on nuclear power.

"It's a submarine that moves through solid rock instead of water. I built it myself. I'm kind of an inventor," he goes.

"Great, but we're stuck up here a million feet off the goddam ground."

"Don't worry about that either. When I'm not inventing or going to school, I also fight crime in the guise of a costumed superhero. I can't tell you my secret identity. I'm sorry."

"That's O.K.," I go. I mean, Bitsy, this kid had *promise* the way most guys have obnoxious *ideas,* if you get what I mean.

"Close your eyes," he goes. I did. I heard this popping sound, and when I opened my eyes again, his ropes

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

were lying on the floor of the cave and he was *gone.*

A little while later I heard this humming noise, and a periscope poked up through the floor about twenty feet away. It turned around a little and pointed at me for a second. Then the top part of the submar — I mean, subterrine — surfaced. Rod opened the hatch and climbed out. "How do you like her?" he goes. He was real proud of it, you could tell.

"She's terrific, get me the hell *out* of here!"

"Sure." He came over and snapped my shackle like it was a stolen credit card.

"I'd kind of like to take my crown with me," I go. I really didn't want to go without it. I mean, I have my old age to plan for.

"We can't take the chance. We'll have to leave it behind." Why is it that heroes are always so goddamn *practical?* I just *knew* he was going to say that. Anyway, there was enough gold and emeralds in what I was wearing to support me for a while. I shrugged. I can be realistic when I want. So he helped me up the ladder and into this cramped ship of his. He closed the hatch and started punching buttons and turning wheels. There was an incredible rocking motion like the A train between Fifty-ninth Street and 125th Street, I thought I was going to *tossez mes doughnuts* right there or something. "We're making good speed," Rod goes.

"Wonderful." I felt sick as the proverbial dog.

Well, Bitsy, it was a rough ride home. There weren't any windows because there was only rock going by. I mean, I *suppose* Rod's invention was brilliant and amazing and all, but it will be a long time before the guy books *cruises* or anything. The Love Boat it ain't — in more ways than one. I'll have to tell you *all* about this Rod Marquand sometime. He was dedicated, Bitsy. I mean, *dedicated.* To science and fighting crime. He figured we were almost home, see, and I go, "Why don't we have lunch or something?" He *turned me down,* sweetie, do you believe *that?* His uncle, the physicist, would be waiting for a report, and besides, there was a whole rash of unsolved crimes recently in New York, and he owed it to his parents to hurry right home, and by then I told him to just *forget* it.

"Where are we now?"

"We're just passing through the lowest level of Penn Station," he goes.

"You can let me out here," I go. I was in a *huff.* Look, not even this boy genius can turn down, Mo-Reen, She-God of the Muck People.

"But—"

"Let me out!" I go, kind of brandishing Old Betsy. I was frustrated that I never did get my licks in against Yag-Nash, and I was just *dying* to start a fight.

Rod stopped the machine and opened the hatch. I squeezed on by

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

him and went up the ladder and looked around. We were now on the second level, not far from the escalator that takes you up to Thirty-fourth Street. I looked down at Rod and I go, "You better sail on out of here, honey, people are gawking." Then I climbed down the outside ladder. The hatch clanged behind me, and the subterrine dived into the floor. I walked toward the escalator, swishing my sword in little angry circles. People got away from me, *fast.*

I had to walk to the diamond district, but it wasn't that far. You should have seen the looks I got from the old guys in the place I went into! I mean, wearing this golden bra and G-string and slashing around with Old Betsy and all, I wonder what I looked like to them. I pried a little emerald out of my raiment and sold it. They gave me a big song and dance about how illegal it all was, but I could see they wanted to get their greedy hands on the emerald and all the rest of it. They offered me a hundred bucks—like I was from out of town, right? I laughed. It was like dickering with Pammy, my stepmother. I ended up getting my price for it, but only by promising that I wouldn't let anyone else buy any of the other jewels. The emeralds are rare and perfect or something. I was going to pay you back the money I owed you out of that cash — see, I *didn't* forget — but when you went on your lousy vacation instead of seeing me, I figured "The hell with *her.*" Instead, you'll find a nice-sized emerald on your coffee ta-

Special offer from the award-winning SF magazine: A full year (12 issues) of F&SF for only $16.97, saving you $4.03 off the newsstand price.

+ **11 time winner of the Hugo award for best SF magazine or best editor.**
+ **Publisher of more Nebula award winning stories (selected by the Science Fiction Writers of America) than any other publication.**
+ **Winner of the 1977, 1978, 1979 and 1980 Locus polls as best SF magazine.**
+ **Winner of the World Fantasy Award, 1979, 1982; Balrog Award, 1981, 1983.**

Please use the coupon on the reverse side; it is backed by this copy, and removal does not affect the test of the story.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ble, and let you go through all the red tape trying to explain where you got it and every thing. If you ever do, pay your mother back for me.

The tape's about finished, Bitsy. I'll see you when you get back from your trip. I hope you're sunburned as hell.

Well, she wasn't *there when I got back. There were only the tape cassette, the emerald, and one god-awful mess in the kitchen. You'd have thought the marines had camped out there on their way to the Halls of Montezuma or something. I can't imagine why Muffy — I mean, Maureen — didn't wait for me. She must have this itch for adventure now, I guess, and went whushing off to some new aggravation somewhere, sometime.*

Speaking of aggravation, I got more than she bargained for with that goddam emerald. I mean, I almost did time in jail on account of it. I'm still not square with the IRS or anybody. I really want to talk to Maureen about that, *believe me. Sword or no sword, she's going to walk out of here with at least a bloody nose.*

With any kind of luck, I'll hear from her soon. It will be worth having to sit through her whole stupid recitation to paste her one in the face. I can't wait.

FANTASY & SCIENCE FICTION, Box 56, Cornwall, CT 06753 7621

☐ **Yes, send me 12 issues of F&SF, the award-winning magazine, for only $16.97, saving $4.03 off the newsstand price**

☐ **Check here if you would like to extend or renew your current sub.**

Name_____

Address_____

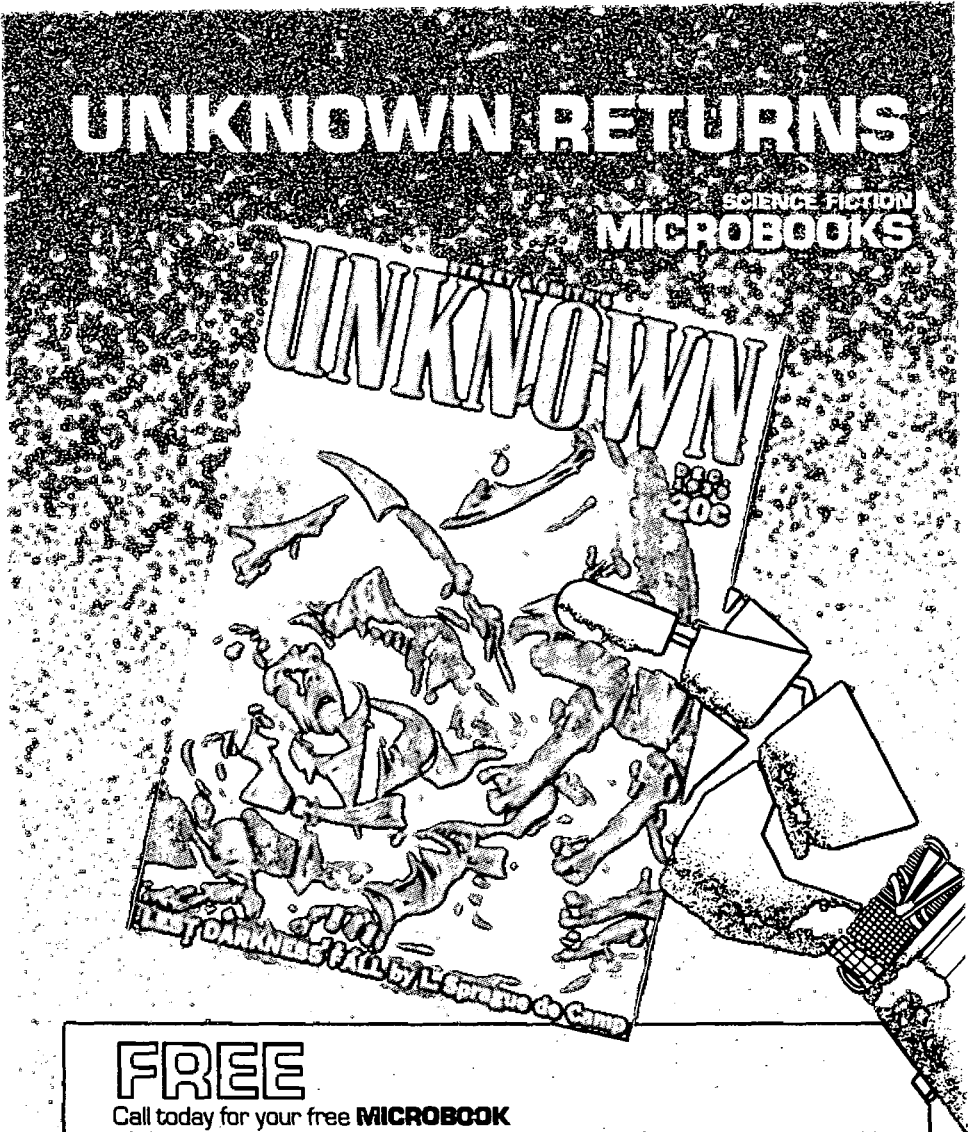
City _____ **State**_____ **Zip**_____

Outside the U.S., please add $4.00 for postage. Please make all checks payable in U.S. dollars.
Allow six weeks for delivery of first copy.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

UNKNOWN RETURNS

SCIENCE FICTION
MICROBOOKS



FREE

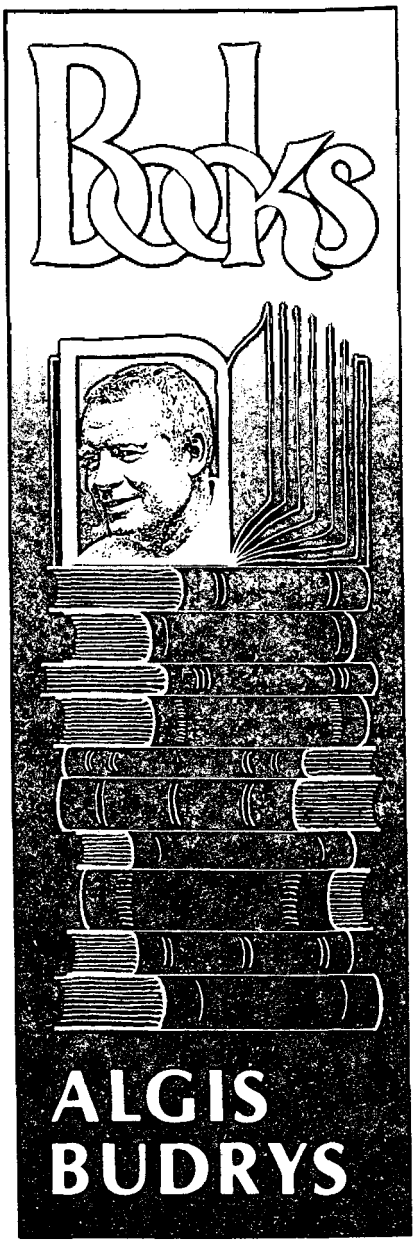
Call today for your free **MICROBOOK** of the very first issue of *Unknown* at no obligation. Discover the new world of **MICROBOOK** Libraries from M.I.C.

FOR INITIAL RESPONSE CALL TOLL FREE
1-800-468-0122
FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION OR IN TEXAS CALL 214-824-3969

MICRO INFORMATION CONCEPTS
DEPT. FM
DALLAS, TX 75221-2163

***The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* is also available in MICROBOOK form.**
Unknown is published in microfiche by special arrangement with Davis Publications, Inc.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



The Dream Years, Lisa Goldstein, Bantam, $14.95

The Memory of Whiteness, Kim Stanley Robinson, Tor, $15.95

The Cat Who Walks Through Walls, Robert A. Heinlein, Putnam's, $17.95

No one is too sure of what creates new writers, although old writing and old writers have something to do with it. I have tried to go back into my own past, searching my mind for the moment when it occurred to me that I might make stories, and I can't quite find it. I recall my first written story — it was science fiction, done at the age of nine, heavily influenced by H. G. Wells and the *Don Winslow of The Navy* comic strip — But that event came relatively late. Before I can remember, on the endpapers of *Robinson Crusoe* I had done a four-panel strip, depicting two friends roaring through the Solar System in a vehicle exactly like a Buck Rogers "flitter", zapping bad guys. It was titled *BRGA,* and I believe those are the only four letters I knew at the time.

Neither of these pieces was crisply plotted. But both of them have enough structure so that one can see a beginning, middle and end. More important, they are not directly and immediately revelatory of my self; they are a different species from the naive "self expression" that grade schools and, a little later, therapists, encourage in children and often describe as "creativity". Even as proto-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

types, mine are stories — there is an evident attempt not to lay myself bare for the world's admiration or healing but to find what is common between myself and the audience, and to lead that audience into some enjoyment not of me but of my work . . .more accurately, our work.

I've spoken to other writers about things like this. What I find is that very likely there was never a time when one could say of us "This person is not yet a potential writer." There must be such a threshold somewhere along the narrative of our development, but it may very well occur in the womb. There are interesting subsidiary questions, such as those relating to the oft-considered possibility that we are all born creative but most of us are quickly switched off by some nearly universal repressor. That's a fashionable thing. But is the repressor cultural or perhaps biochemical? If biochemical, does this mean there is Darwinian merit in low species creativity? If cultural, does this imply conversely that the evolutionary impact of unchecked creativity can be so swift and noticeable that perhaps nearly all cultural traits encrypt a frantic need to suppress it? Did we invent nuclear warfare through fear of Picasso?

Whatever, a lot of this speculation is suspect because it is so damned smoothly convertible into cocktail-party brilliance. But some cultural/biochemical process has through the ages ensured the continuous generation of persons who create forms of art, and this is true despite the strong probability that at some early point there either was art, but as yet no artist to see it, or no art and yet a person spontaneously moved to create its first example.*

It's true, and observation indicates a predictable series of developmental steps. Most people discover reading as just another one of culture's tools for minimizing environmental impact on the individual. But for some it's a doorway into manifold universes of reality or even speculation. These latter folk don't even notice the moment when they slip over into doing their own reading instead of listening to stories being read to them. They don't need to read well, or much at all, before they are extracting first meanings from encoded data, though they swiftly learn to read very well. And although they are sharply aware of the authors' role in their reading, they are in some sense aware of their participation in the process.

That's apparently crucial. Proto-writers are instinctively aware of the fallacy in believing that the story is in the printed words. They know — seldom consciously, but they know — that the story is in their own heads;

**Never mind the chicken and the egg— If a pensive bear in a deserted forest makes a doo-doo in the shape of a happy face, and no one sees it, is it art? Is the bear eligible for a grant?*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

that the printed words cue a complex of associations derived from their own lives. The printed words inform them there is a green meadow containing a tree and a bird in that tree. The sum and substance of their experience provides the tone of the green, the shape and distribution of the grass, the angle of the sunlight, the shape, size, and perspective distance of the tree, the feathers on the bird, and its song over the hum of the insects in the meadow as the clouds drift overhead in the blue sky.

Each reader of this sort revels in mutable universes. The author guides, like an unfolder of maps. The reader is aware of this, favoring one guide over another for various reasons, but more and more of the topographical detail is provided by the reader, until one day this facility reaches the point where the reader also wants to provide the map. This decision is easily reached; the richer the reading experience, the more valid is the reader's claim to auctorial skills.

Certain consequences follow. First experiences at creating one's own map tend to lead to the discovery that map-unfolding cannot usually be random; that by cultural agreement there ought to be reasons why the reader is being asked to look at this terrain at this time, and not some other terrain that will be exposed later. Usually, one sets people in motion, and their motion determines the exposure of various aspects of the map. But since this motion is often dull if it remains random—that is, "senseless" — one must provide these people with motivation; crossed motivations provide conflict; the results of conflict are expressed as plot developments; plot developments in turn lead through complications to a resolution, etc., et cetera, and we have flowered into that armamentarium of technique and technical jargon whose use marks the difference between the amateur and the professional. That is, the professional normally understands that it's all just talk, albeit occasionally useful talk, whereas the amateur revels in having memorized it and thinks it is a real thing. The real thing is the sense within one's self that the world of the story remains new and various as one proceeds through it.

But all of this, and discovering all this, has certain effects. Many of them have to do with considerations of reality:

Lisa Goldstein's *The Dream Years* introduces a charming notion — that the student rebellion in Paris in 1968 would have succeeded in beneficially transforming all France, and perhaps the whole world, if it had been able to get better help from the Surrealist movement that followed World War I in France.

Now, this requires a series of assumptions about reality. The simplest one is that political reality depends

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

on perception; that how people regard themselves and their fellows is all the social substrate there is. Therefore, if one can galvanize the masses into a new regard, one can overnight have a new society. All that is required to accomplish this—

Well, in the real world what has usually been ultimately required is systematic bloodshed, and what has usually been accomplished is an unstable grudging lip-service to a new vocabulary while the same old inertial mechanisms grind on as they have been doing since Mesopotamia. National Book Award-winner Goldstein (for *The Red Magician,* recently released in Pocket paperback) is all too well aware of this, being an educated person. Being an educated person, she introduces the device of actual, not merely spiritual, contact with the Surrealists. That is, from time to time, via some appropriately inexplicable lacunae in the structure of time, a 1968 woman named Solange seduces the fascinated attention of Robert St. Onge, novelist and closest friend of Andre Breton, Surrealism's prophet. Seeing Surrealism as a profound political reaction to World War I and its causes — which it may well have actually been — Solange wants St. Onge to come forward in time from the 1920's and in some irrational way infuse the 1968 rebels with the stuff of mutable reality.

If there is this sort of conspiracy for the good — in which "good" is the product of an intuitive consensus, not of a codified morality — then there must be a counterforce that is intuitively "bad," and so Solange and Robert, now episodic lovers although Robert is wavering in his adherance to Breton's formulations, are opposed by a fearsome demon out of time who personifies all the inertial calls to duty, propriety and custom, and attempts to confuse Robert by capturing him and subjecting him to a ceaseless, grinding barrage of plausibilities and platitudes.

Finally, though in vividly realistic scenes Robert rejects Breton (but not necessarily Surrealism) and the 1968 rebellion falls to government resistance that amounts to platitudes coming out of the end of a gun, there is a surrealistic ending in which the future is infused with hope, though Solange and Robert are parted for the nonce.

It's a book unlike most stefnal works of our time, obviously, and Goldstein is not given to the milieux commonly employed by your conventional American SF writer. You are going to have to like this book on your own terms. It's rather well written, though the ending chapters seem a trifle hurried and out of keeping with the preceding tone. The "insider" view of the Surrealist movement is convincing, as is the feeling of participation in the 1968 events. To ultimately care deeply about this book, you have to be something of a politi-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

cal animal. But you can care quite a bit for it simply because it goes to the heart of SF, where we each come to grapple with what reality is, and what we would prefer it to be.

Usually, of course, that's in the subtext. But all three books this month are of the genre in which the question is asked directly and its asking is then exploited for story purposes.

Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Memory of Whiteness* is the most direct in referring to the fact that theoretical physics keeps finding more and more parts of reality that are perhaps arbitrary. Every time we think we have found the fundamental particle, we then find components for it, and now we are at the point when no one at the forefront wants to talk about "the" fundamental particle at all; instead, they talk about things that go boomp in the night. There are those now who say that even the most puissant mathematics may be basically inadequate to finally describe Nature. Robinson's postulate from this is that music might do the job.

This is a nice conceit, in exactly the way Samuel Johnson would have meant that phrase. And from it, Robinson has constructed the story of Johannes Wright, master musician, ninth operator of an elaborate, not totally understood complex instrument built generations earlier by the legendary Holywelkin, who was both musician and physicist.

Those who know Robinson for the elegant and conscious craftsman he is, will have turned to this, his first hard-cover book, with the expectation of finding an artifact created by someone advanced past *The Wild Shore* and *Icehenge,* his first two (paperback) novels. This does not happen. Although Tor doesn't say so, this book is what James Blish used to call a baby picture. . .an early manuscript that didn't get published, no matter how much he turned its knobs, during the writer's apprenticeship and which has been buffed up and released now that later work has given him a name.

The central notion is fine, obviously. But Robinson lacked the confidence to concentrate on it, and the later ruthlessness to trim away the dumb hugger-mugger plot and the implausible scenario of a systemwide musical tour. The one is an attempt at something like an *Astounding Science Fiction* political science speculation, and the other is the sort of travelogue story that writers of SF juveniles used to use so they could do nine easy lectures on the climatology and geology of exotic locales at so much per word. Both are most likely the vestiges of the young Robinson's preferred reading, applied not consciously or with any deep understanding of their (now outmoded) functional *raisons d'etre* but simply because they "felt" like science fiction.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The Memory of Whiteness is not a book I can recommend for reading pleasure; students of our literature might find it uncommonly interesting for eschatological reasons.

Robinson is one of our hot new stars, and deservedly so. But he has yet to demonstrate much real grasp of why stories have structure. He is the cerebral kind of writer, obviously taking great pains to shape things just so, and modelling his work on that of carefully selected literary preceptors. It's therefore paradoxical that *The Wild Shore,* for instance, contains any number of outstanding episodes but never coheres into a novel, and that he has permitted himself to release as diffused a piece of work as *The Memory of Whiteness.*

But who is to really wonder, when writers like Asimov, Clarke and Heinlein no longer feel constrained to go where the story requires, but instead pull it into shapes dictated by outside considerations? There simply aren't very many prestigious demonstrations of how plot works or of how an organically whole story can generate enormous emotional power as no other form can. Isaac's ongoing "reconciliation" of the Foundation stories and his robot stories may be deft and clever, a brilliant mind's solution to an intellectual challenge, but the challenge arises from Isaac Asimov's world, not from within the Foundation universe or from that of the robots. And this shows, as does the purely mechanical construction of all Clarke work since *The Fountains of Paradise.*

Now that may seem an absurd cavil. After all, everything that happens in a story manuscript reflects happenings in the author's mind, and all "happenings in an author's mind" can be described as intellectual activity. Precisely so; they can thus be described, but how then does one assign comparative value to them: How does anyone ever write a good story? Ah, there are degrees of validity, you say; some events in a fictional construct seem more real than others, seem more likely. And so there is good writing and bad writing. But what are you measuring against? There is nothing to measure against except some sort of internal validity within the story.

The thing that gives us our sense of reality is mutual consistency. There is a time in our lives when we know only some one thing, and this is followed by a time when we might know two. We cannot fully know the second until we have fitted it to what we knew before, because if the second thing permanently calls the first thing into question, then we no longer know the first thing. And if the first thing permanently calls the second into question, then that second thing remains a plausible speculation, but it is not a fact, and some other fact will become the second thing we

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"know" as distinguished from "entertain." And thence on to the third thing, and the fourth, and so on, until Hell won't have it, and every one of the *n* things we "know" must not contradict anything else we "know," as distinguished from "hope for," "pray for," or "tell stories about."

But what makes "telling stories" work is a reflection of the same process. You show the reader one thing, and then the next, and the next, and they begin to knit up into a conditional reality. Some things that occur as the manuscript unwinds from left to right don't seem to fit. They don't contradict, but they don't match. These are held in the mind, and each time a new "fact" is added to the growing shape of the story's reality, all the "loose ends" are brought up again in the reader's mind and matchings are attempted. Sometimes they fit, unexpectedly, and the story springs into an intriguing new shape. Sometimes they don't fit yet. But there is always one central shape — one evolving conditional reality — with loose ends flitting around it, attempting to match in.*

Comes a time when everything matches; the structure, with one last pang, crystallizes into a clearly visible shape. That is, the story has done with its conditional reality that thing which reality fails to do; it has demonstrated cause and effect over a long term and over every step of complex events. By definition, that demonstrative structure is a "story," as distinguished from a mere lie, jest, jape, anecdote, instruction or maniacal fugue. It is an assurance that sense can be made of important things.

O.K. How do you make sense of the perfectly logical proposition that since there is not and cannot be a direct proof of reality, reality must be purely consensual and the only remaining question is How Many Make a Quorum And How Many of Them Can Be Nuts?

This is the question Robert A. Heinlein has spent a great deal of time exploring. The one most striking example is his novel *The Number of The Beast,* in which it turns out, literally, that reality is whatever Robert A. Heinlein wants it to be.

Number, a work perceived by many as enormously self-indulgent and barely coherent, also represents that from which Heinlein is said to have "returned" with *Friday,* a subsequent book that many (the same many, I guess) said was his best work since *The Moon is A Harsh Mistress,* a work post-dating *Stranger in A Strange Land. Mistress* had unexpectedly harked back to his *ASF* mode, in which Heinlein had established himself as the master of cause-effect plotting. Clear so far? O.K., one of the attractive things about *Friday* was its evocation of the social system and some of the characters from *Gulf,* Hein-

*Oh, I could go on like this for hours.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

lein's legendary two-part *ASF* novel.

Now we have *The Cat Who Walks Through Walls,* which reconciles the *Friday* universe with the universe of *The Number of the Beast* and turns on specific attempts to revive Adam Selene, the computer personality who was the front for the encrypted hero of *The Moon is A Harsh Mistress*. For Iagniappe, Heinlein introduces a Time Patrol, which with the cat — Schrödinger's cat, as it happens — recalls *The Door Into Summer* and, of course, "By His Bootstraps" and "All You Zombies." Then there's the jest that this is subtitled "A Comedy of Manners," evoking his most recent *Job: A Comedy of Justice*, to which *Cat* is not otherwise related on any obvious plane. So one thing he has done here is to out-Asimov Asimov, granted he did not start with his universes anywhere near as far apart.

Taken cold — assuming a naive reader who never heard of any other Heinlein work — *Cat* is O.K. Parts of it are more than that. Especially in the beginning, it crackles along and, except that everyone uses the same turns of phrase, it has characterization, development, and pace. But *Number of The Beast* began the same way, then crashed, and so does *Cat,* though not as badly. Eventually, it becomes clear that the chapter-ending climaxes are not true plot-turns. They are simply arbitrary bombs, thrown to create seeming problems that will be talked away, and thrown, furthermore, not by an antagonist but clearly by Heinlein himself. The closing chapters of the book consist of (A) talk designed to explain away loose ends, (B) unproven speculation as to why Colin Campbell was framed for murder and hunted from pillar to post throughout society, (C) unproven speculation on who was responsible for the twin attacks on Aunt Lilybet's Moon-bus, (D) no pickup at all of the earlier plant about the bus's cargo, (E) a brief and very wan consideration of the actual role played by Bill the clumsy Socialist assassin, (F) a complete dismissal of all other loose ends with the (almost verbatim) assertion that after all Heinlein is free not only to deal off the bottom, he can print additional cards in the middle of the game, since there is no reality, (G) a closing smoke-blower where Colin, his wife the fascist assassin, the cat, and almost everyone else die in the successful (?) attempt to retrieve "Adam Selene" from the shut-down Lunar computer. Nor is it explained why, if reality is controlled by "fabulists," and Campbell is, aside from a Colonel of elite strike forces (and a man with a very large penis), a successful hack writer, Campbell — or any other fabulist — couldn't create another computer, or why they need a computer in the first place.

Follow me? This thing makes O.K. reading until you try to make it a story, and the more you bring to it the measurements that define a story, the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

more it becomes evident that Hein-is simply putting down whatever pleases him that particular day. He is expressing himself, and if you are fond of him, that's probably charming. I am fond of him.

But a certain thread has been lost, and we are off the map.

IMPORTANT NOTICE TO SUBSCRIBERS ON THE MOVE

If you are planning a change of address please notify us as far in advance as possible, and allow six weeks for the change to become effective.

Be sure to give us both your old and new address, including the zip codes. Print clearly and, if possible, attach an old mailing label.

OLD ADDRESS
(attach label here if available)

Name _____

Address _____

City _____

State _____ Zip _____
(please print)

NEW ADDRESS

Name _____

Address _____

City _____

State _____ Zip _____

SUBSCRIPTION SERVICE,
Mercury Press, Inc., PO Box 56, Cornwall, CT 06753

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

This powerful new story by Wayne Wightman ("Ganglion," August 1984) delves into the future pornography industry, mind control, and a man's beliefs in how things should work in a crumbling world based upon broken ethics.

The Metaphysical Gun

BY
WAYNE WIGHTMAN

"Christ, I didn't know such places existed," Carl said. His hands were white on the steering wheel. What he had seen had unnerved him. Even Bicchel, sitting next to him, seemed stunned. "He owns that place?" Carl asked.

Bicchel nodded. He propped his elbow on the door ledge next to the window and draped a willowy hand across his mouth and chin. He sighed heavily. "Don't let him get too far ahead of you. He gets pissed if he has to wait."

Carl accelerated. The steering wheel began to vibrate in his hands. The freeway was pitted and gouged, and off on the sides, burned-out vehicles covered with smoke stains and rust lined the shoulder. Occasionally Carl and Bicchel would pass a wreck with curtains in its windows — several times they saw a derelict sitting in one of the cars, smoking a cigarette or eating or staring at the passing cars. Ahead, on the freeway, Grossman's limousine moved expertly and swiftly from lane to lane, passing slower cars and dodging chuckholes.

"From now on," Bicchel said, "keep your goddamned mouth shut about how depressing you find your job. Please."

"*You* don't think it's depressing? How are we supposed to stay normal sitting all day watching smut tapes and filling out those moronic review forms? That's not depressing?"

"It's irrelevant, that's what it is," Bicchel said. He spoke with a slight lisp. He waved his fingers at the windshield. "Watch out up here — last week the right three lanes were blocked."

Carl moved to the left. A second later, the black limousine did the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

same. Up ahead, Carl saw several cars and a van crosswise in the right lanes. Several people milled around the van. The limousine swerved toward them — they dived off the shoulder into a tangle of vines and ice plant. Carl glanced at Bicchel for an explanation.

"He does that all the time," Bicchel said. "I rode with him once. He said it makes them appreciate life more."

"Does he ever hit anybody?"

Bicchel shrugged. "Couple times he has." He put his feet against the dashboard and hugged his knees. "Just don't say anything to him, all right? Especially about your work. You get depressed about it, I'll give you a bunch of antidepressants, some whites, and some smoke. That's how I deal with it. Does wonders. Just don't say anything to Grossman about the job — all right? I couldn't stand having to go to that place again."

"Right." Carl nodded. The limousine fishtailed ahead of them and Carl saw half a dozen derelicts throw themselves off the freeway embankment. The black car straightened out and accelerated.

"You find this work depressing?" Grossman had asked, lighting a Filipino cigarette and sitting on the edge of Carl's desk. Grossman was not tall, but he was all wire and sinew; he moved with a grace that smelled of restrained violence. He made Carl nervous. This morning Grossman was wearing a pale pink lace-front shirt, which for him was not unusual. Grossman nodded at the video monitor on Carl's desk. On the screen, an unnaturally handsome man was moving his tongue between a woman's breasts. "This," Grossman said, "you find depressing? Your priorities are all fucked up, Carl. You're running about two quarts low, Carl." On the screen, the man's tongue was moving down, down toward the woman's navel. "Look at those people," Grossman said. "Does it seem to you that they're unhappy? Does it seem to you that these people are leading miserable lives?" Grossman breathed smoke.

"No, sir, it doesn't. But sitting here eight hours a day, watching people have sex and then trying to fill out these review forms ... it kind of ... does something to me."

"What might that be?" Grossman was smiling. He straightened his bow tie with a touch. His fingernails gleamed.

"When I go home at night, I try to watch television, but I can't seem to get interested in it. When I read, my eyes ... I don't know. I can't read, either. As for going out, going out with a woman ... well...." Carl felt sweat starting to break out across his forehead. "I don't even feel much like eating. I've been losing weight lately."

"Well, Carl, I know that isn't *precisely* true. I know, for example, that you and Miss Setjac have gone out twice." Gita Setjac was a woman hired

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

two weeks earlier to be the production coordinator of Libidex North American. Grossman patted Carl's shoulder and smiled benevolently. "But you have a home to go to, don't you, Carl?"

"Yes, Mr. Grossman."

"And you have a job to pay the rent and to pay for food, in the event that you *do* want to eat, and if you *do* want to go out with Miss Setjac, you have enough money from your salary here to go to a nice club, buy a few drinks, and have a nice time. Am I wrong?"

"No, Mr. Grossman."

"Nevertheless, you find yourself depressed because of your duties here, and, more generally, because your life has not amounted to what you thought that it should amount to. True?"

Carl swallowed. Behind Grossman, Bicchel was sitting at his desk, diligently trying to ignore what he was overhearing. Carl's throat was as dry as tissue. Grossman was being far too nice, too understanding — and he was obviously up to something. Rumor had it that when Grossman was up to something, it was time to lie low.

"Your life disappoints you," Grossman said, fingering his lace with his perfect fingers.

"In some ways," Carl said tentatively.

Grossman stood up, put his Filipino cigarette between his lips, and with one hand knocked the wrinkles out of his silk trousers. With his other hand, he punched the OFF button on Carl's monitor. "I want to show you something," he said. "Let's go for a ride."

Grossman took Gita Setjac with him in his car and told Carl to follow with Bicchel. They took one of the better freeways to the east side of the city, where the dry hills rolled into the dried and half-abandoned neighborhoods of high-density, quick-construction condominiums. Five minutes into the beige desolation of the country, Grossman turned onto a dirt road. Six corners later, the car stopped at a gate that had long since been torn from its hinges. On the post that still held the hinges, there was a sign:

WILLOWRIDGE
CARE AND OBSERVATION
CENTER

"What is this place?" Carl asked Bicchel.

"Never heard of it." He quickly glanced up and then resumed busily cleaning his fingernails with a shred of dental floss. "Hospital?" he lisped.

"Doesn't look very ... healthy."

Clouds of dust swelled behind the limousine ahead of them, and under their tires brush crackled and rocks knocked at the chassis. They rounded a corner and saw amidst the dry brush three Quonset huts and a larger tent-house. Three men and a woman stood outside the tent-house door; they wore nothing.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Is he making a film out here?" Bicchel asked. "Maybe that's why he brought Gita."

The cars stopped, and Carl saw that there was something wrong with the four people. Two of the men had prognathic jaws and stood slumped like their spines were partially dissolved. The third man had no irises and periodically slapped the side of his head. His palm came away bloody. The woman was dark-haired and seemed completely normal except for the dead look in her eyes. She was pretty, even, and although Carl knew there was something wrong with her just by some indescribable peculiarity in her carriage, he could not help staring at her breasts; they hung halfway to her navel from their weight and swelled out nearly as wide as her hips.

"Too bad she's not a boy," Bicchel said softly, awestruck.

Grossman was getting out of his car. He knocked wrinkles out of his trousers and then offered his hand to Gita, who emerged, long legs first — she seemed to hesitate — then she got out and stood next to Grossman, surveying the buildings and hills and the four naked people.

"What is this place?" Bicchel asked, his hands in his pockets, making his hips look wider than they already were.

"The Willowridge C. and O. Center. Couldn't you read the sign?" Grossman said pleasantly. "I established this place as a humanitarian gesture and tax dodge the same time I created Libidex North American."

The frame and canvas door clacked open, and a twenty-some-year-old woman stepped out; she wore a crisp bush jacket and faded Levi's. She was narrow-faced, and her stern expression looked comfortable-looking that way. "Good morning, Mr. Grossman. You've seen Linda already, I gather. Linda — turn around."

The large-breasted woman turned. One of the prognathic men coughed. A second later, like a response to the noise, the slapper struck himself.

"I'll take a look at her later," Grossman said, nodding and smiling. "Dr. Adams, these are some of my people from the Libidex office: Mr. Howard Bicchel, Carl Judson, and Gita Setjac. I thought I'd show them around the refuge."

Bicchel glanced at Carl and raised his eyebrows at the word.

"Ward A is full. B just has a few stragglers in it," the doctor said. She led the way.

Gita's face betrayed no expression; she seemed as casual as she had two nights before when Carl had taken her to dinner and had splurged on two bottles of wine. She appeared to be looking above the Quonset huts.

Dr. Adams opened the door. The smell gagged Bicchel. He turned aside and puked in a green tumbleweed that grew from under the Quonset foundation. The air inside was moist

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

with human sweat and breath and dense with the odor of urine and excrement.

"I hose it out in the evening," the doctor said. "If I had known you were coming...."

"No problem," Grossman said. He turned to Gita. "I forgot the flowers back in the car. Could you get them for me? There are several bouquets — Carl, maybe you could help her?"

Carl hurried away from the opened door and realized he was outpacing Gita. He took her arm. "What is this place? Did he tell you what's going on here?"

"He said it was a refuge. He said we were coming for a visit because he wanted to show you something." Her voice was oddly flat.

"Is something wrong? Are you mad at me about something?"

"I'm not mad at anyone," she said, opening the limousine door. "I'll get in and hand the flowers out to you." When she got in the car, her dress pulled halfway up her thigh. Her skin was white and smooth. She distracted his gaze with a bouquet of cape marigolds, gazanias, and crotalarias. He took it, and she stepped out of the car with bouquets of baby's breath and celosias and another of white roses. He took the roses from her.

"Come to my house tonight," she said flatly. "The arbor door will be open. Just come in. Don't knock." They began walking back toward Grossman and the doctor.

"Would you like for me to bring anything? A bottle of wine?"

"Eight o'clock," she said. "Just come in." Her voice was only loud enough for him to hear.

Carl walked close to her. "Why don't you see if you can ride back with me? I'd like to talk to you."

"We can talk tonight." She was staring at the white roses as she walked — she didn't seem to Carl to be the same person who had eaten with him and told him stories about her Javanese grandfather and her Canadian mother. As she walked, with her free hand she reached into the flowers, seized a small insect, and cracked it in her fingers. Carl said nothing.

"Thank you, thank you," Grossman said, taking all the flowers from them. "Well, shall we visit our clients?"

"I don't think I can go in," Bicchel said. He was white around his mouth. "I'm not good with sick people."

"Be a man," Grossman said chuckling. "You only have to smell it. Those poor assholes have to sleep in it."

The doctor stepped inside the Quonset hut. Grossman held out his hand, ushering Carl and Bicchel inside. They entered.

Carl tried to breathe shallowly — but before he could think how disgusting the odor was, he stopped at the foot of the first cot, appalled at what lay before him. The hut was not as dark as it had seemed from the outside. Against one side were a dozen

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

cots with plywood bottoms. Only three of the old cots were occupied, and the bodies that lay on them were only marginally human. They were scrawny, sticklike people, not readily identifiable as male or female, and their limbs lay crossed and angled like branches that fell from dead trees. The other clients lay on the floor or sat against the curving walls. They were crusty with filth. One gently rocked, knocking his forehead against the foot of the cot-frame. Another masturbated wildly, rolling his head on his shoulders and pounding his thigh with his other hand.

"What is this?" Carl said.

"This is my vegetable garden," Grossman said. "If it weren't for me, all these people would be dead."

Gita was the image of equanimity. She held her hands folded in front of her. Grossman handed her the roses.

"Pass these out to them, will you?"

She took them and offered one to the catatonic on the nearest bed. When she got no response, she laid the stem of the rose across his fist. Down to the end of the hut she moved, putting flowers near the clients. They did not respond to her in any way.

"What happed to these people?" Carl asked. "Why are they out here in the foothills, in this place?"

"What happened to these people, Carl, is that they were born." He was grinning. "Yes, they were born this way. IQs barely measurable — none of them over thirty." Grossman ran his fingers along the lace of his shirtfront. "Their families can't keep them, so they allow me to take them off their hands. Or their families send them to institutions and then fall delinquent in their payments, and the institutions allow me to alleviate their case loads."

Gita returned to him, empty-handed, and he gave her the second bouquet. "Give them these, too," he said. "The understanding, of course, in both instances, is the same — that where I take them is my business, what I do with them is up to me, and the merchandise is nonreturnable." He put out his hands. "I do a lot of people a big favor. And the people who've lived with these things know that whether our clients are dead or alive is, to our clients here, immaterial. Y'see, Carl, they don't know they're alive. They play with their shit, and they don't even know enough to know how to be unhappy with their lives. How's that make you feel? Feeling better about yourself? Like your job a little more?"

"Why do you have them? Why do you do this?" Gita came back again empty-handed. "Why do you give them flowers?" Carl was afraid he would not be able to stop asking questions. He was afraid he was going to attack Grossman.

"I do this because I'm a nice guy, Carl. Everything I do is to make someone happy." He patted him on the back once. "C'mon, Carl, get the shit

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

outta your brains. You know who's suffering here? You and Bicchel. That's all. I'm not suffering. These guys here aren't suffering. Neither is Gita. Hand out the rest of these," he said, letting her take the last bouquet from his hands. "Our clients here provide organs when they are needed. They provide 'invaluable data,' as they say, when it comes to perfecting certain surgical techniques or testing out new drugs. I have many investments, Carl, and even more interests."

"Can we go now?" It was Bicchel. He had never moved far from the doorway.

"It isn't so grim, Carl. Look, how about we let you have some say in what happens to the young woman outside with the big tits." Grossman turned to the doctor. "What's her name?"

"Linda."

"I was going to let her in our more experimental films. You probably would've had them come across your desk — pardon the expression — in a few weeks." The doctor was chuckling. "But now: you decide. Do we make a star of her? Do we leave her here for organ donation? Or do we send her back where she came from? Doctor, tell Carl here what would happen to her if we returned her."

"She came from Rembrandt Meadows — they've already listed her as deceased with a contagious illness; that's how they get around having the family come and claim the body. So if she goes back, they won't even let her through the door. They'll send her to Snuff City."

Grossman put his arm around Carl's shoulder. He smelled of cigarettes. "We wouldn't want her to go to Snuff City, would we? Not with a set of knockers like that. It would be a terrible waste. You take a minute, Carl, and you think about it: She can be a star, an organ donor, or a handful of ashes. You decide."

Gita returned again. The grays and browns of the ward were littered with spots of red and yellow and blue and white. Carl looked into her eyes — she seemed to be looking at the wall behind him. He wanted to take her hand and pull her away, out of the darkness and stink and into sun. They could drive away, far away, and if they could get enough gasoline, they could start working their way north where Carl had heard it rained more, was cooler, and where there were fewer people.... But the way she looked past him, her serenity, and her willingness to do what Grossman told her made Carl wonder if she would leave.

"Well?" Grossman asked. "What's it going to be? What have you decided for Linda?"

"I won't decide for you."

"You're deciding for *her*. Her life is in your hands. If you don't decide, I'll make a star out of her. There are a few things I've never been able to successfully tape — she'll require a little

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

surgery first, though. C'mon, Carl — decide. When my doctors get finished with her, she'll be famous. She'll be unique. Decide, Carl. A little excision here, a little grafting there, move a few organs out of the way. Have you decided yet? I think I'll name her *Vicki Versatelle.* What's it going to be, Carl?"

He impulsively took Gita's wrist and pulled her a step toward the door where Bicchel waited with his hand over his mouth. Gita stumbled forward the one step.

"Tell him you're staying here," Grossman said.

"I'm staying here," she said. She was looking at him now.

"Leave with me — we'll go north."

She said nothing.

"I can get the gasoline," Carl said, hearing his own voice starting to sound helpless. "We don't have to work for someone like him. We can leave."

Grossman turned to the doctor. He no longer seemed interested in Carl or Gita. He touched his tie and picked something from under one of his nails. "This Linda," he said conversationally to the doctor, "she isn't deformed in any way, is she?"

"Not that shows. No language ability, either input or output. No affective manifestations. She was born normal, according to the driver who brought her here, but her mother threw her against a wall. She's been M-squared ever since."

Gita stood rigid, Carl holding her wrist; she looked unblinking into his eyes. It seemed to him that she wanted to tell him something secret.

Grossman was talking to Carl again. "M-squared means 'moving meat,' and since you have decided not to decide, you've made the decision for Lovely Linda. I'll get the surgeons on her — pardon the expression — right away."

Gita was leaning toward Carl. Grossman turned away, taking the doctor with him. "Come to my house at eight o'clock," she whispered in his ear. "Come in through the arbor door — come to my room."

So that was it, Carl thought — she would explain then why she was acting this way, why she did whatever Grossman asked her to do. Perhaps, he thought, she was attempting to give Grossman a false sense of authority — maybe she was even going to suggest herself that they leave Libidex that very night. Such information had to be kept from Grossman because he might get the mistaken idea that Carl or Gita or both were in the secret employ of one of the competitors. Competition for the onanist market was fierce, and Libidex stock had recently been slipping enough that no one with a normal sense of self-preservation would want to risk inciting Grossman to protect his interests.

Carl released her hand, turned and left the building. The sun blinded him.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"What'd she say?" Bicchel was whispering as they went back to the car. "What'd she say to you?"

Carl got into his car. Even though the windows were all down, the air inside it was unmoving and well over a hundred degrees. He wondered if he should trust Bicchel. He decided as Bicchel got in the passenger side that a little doubt was too much to risk.

"She said I should mind my own business."

"Bummer." Bicchel slumped back in the seat. "This is one fucking hell of a place. I was going to a speedball orgy tonight, but I don't feel much like it now. I feel like watching television. Can you believe that? I must be psycho."

"You think he'll fire me?" Carl touched the steering wheel. It burned his hand.

"Nah. You do your work and you provided him with a little entertainment. He really likes to put people in double binds and see how they twitch."

"How'd I do?"

"You did real good. It would've been more effective if you'd've puked like I did. I'm a lyrical nihilist and I couldn't stand it."

Grossman and Gita followed the doctor out of the Quonset hut. They were squinting and shading their eyes with their hands. Grossman seemed to be exar ning the large-breasted woman. She and the three men stood oblivious to everything, to the people, to the sun that slowly turned their skin pink, and to the smell that drifted out of the building. Grossman was nodding now. "I'll send someone out for her this evening," Carl heard him say.

Gita followed him to the limousine, and seconds later, the huge engine roared to life, blowing a cloud of dust out from under the car. As Carl followed the car down the dirt road, he looked in his rearview mirror and saw the doctor herd the woman and the three men into the ward. The man with no irises agitatedly slapped himself now, twice for every step. All inside, the doctor closed the door behind her, and Carl turned his eyes to the dust-billowing limousine ahead of him.

As he drove, his mind held the image of Gita strolling through the ward, amongst the twitching defectives, through the flowers and shit.

The remainder of the day Carl spent at his desk, running tape after tape through his set and dutifully filling out the review sheets. He wanted to look grateful for his job; he wanted to look diligent; he wanted to look *harmless* — because right after work, he was going to buy food, water, a few extra parts for his car, and he was going to start asking around about the highway conditions and the gasoline situation on the roads north.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Getting a few gallons here or there was no problem — but getting his twenty-eight-gallon tank filled all at once usually took a fair amount of phone calling. And he wanted to get it all done by eight o'clock. With luck, they could be on the road by nine and not be missed for twelve hours.

By 7:30, he had filled his tank, got several bags of food and two plastic jugs of water, and had time to stop at a bar for a glass of beer. The bartender was a woman. "Want me to turn off the TV?" she asked. She had dark, stringy hair that hung around her face like ragged lace, and in the gloom it seemed to Carl that her skin was heavily covered with makeup. The two of them were alone in the bar.

"You can leave it on," he said. "I have time for only this one drink. I'm going north tonight."

"I heard it's no better up there," she said. She pulled a glass from under the bar and poured herself bourbon. "They don't kill each other so much because there's not that much up there to fight over. You'll have to take the Coalinga highway. The main one's been blocked."

On the television, a man in an unusual hat was interviewing a sobbing fat woman who had tried to dry her poodle in a microwave oven. The dog had exploded.

"It was a *ac*cident!" her small voice said. "I had a *par*ty to go to and I wanted her to *look* nice."

"Who blocked the highway?" Carl asked.

The woman shrugged heavily and swirled her drink. "Buncha assholes who thought they's going to set up their own country. Y'know," she said, pausing lengthily, "one way to definitely get your buns splayed out is to announce something like that. The marines came in. They don't know who the fuck's doing what, so they blow up everything. All that's left of the Kingdom of Assholes is the roadblocks. Now if you want to go around killing people, no one gives a big shit. But threaten the Big Dick in Washington, you know, give him an excuse to get his rocks off, he gives you the terminal unpleasantness." She nodded at the TV. "Watch this."

It was a report of a war in a country Carl had never heard of, where more soldiers died in ice bogs than died from the enemy. When the commercial came on, the woman said, "See that? Now we're fighting over dirt. Everybody admits the fucking place is worthless. And the place is so dinky there won't be enough room to bury the people who die for it." She shook her head sadly. "Piss." She shook her head again. "Want another beer, keep me company till the late crowd comes in?"

"Thanks, no," Carl said. "It's time I got going. I have to pick someone up." He paid her and said, "So long," as he went out the door. Had it not been time to go, he would have left

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

anyway; she was not making him feel better.

Gita's house was dark. He parked at the curb and turned off his car. In the silence, his ears hummed. The clock on his dash said 8:03.

Carl walked around the privet hedge and up the short gravel drive. Off to the right he saw something that could have been an arbor, so he went toward it, found an opening in the foliage, and stepped inside. The arbor was filled with spots of moonlight. On a small wooden table, patches of white light shivered from a breeze so slight that it could not be felt. The warm air smelled of moist earth.

A pair of french doors led into the house. Carl expected to see a small light inside the house, but there was none. He had expected to see Gita waiting inside, perhaps with a bag ready, or a bottle of wine along with a few sandwiches. But that clearly was not the case. Had she gone out momentarily? The only other thing he could think of was that she might be in the back part of her house — perhaps in her bedroom.

Carl put his hand on the icy door handle and turned it. High in his chest, just below his neck, he could feel his heart pounding.

The living room was dark. Furniture hovered over the carpet like black globs of absence. Through a doorway straight in front of him, he could see moonlight coming through a window and glinting off a rack of dishes. There was one other door; it was a hallway, and a faint yellow baseboard light illuminated the walls and cast pebbly shadows across the irregularities in the carpet.

He listened. He heard a soft noise, like a door closing over a rug, or a branch moving against the outside of the house, or it could have been a sigh. As he crept down the hall, his legs made huge triangular shadows against the wall. Only one door, a door at the end, was open. Carl stopped again and listened. The noise might have been a sheet being pulled across the bed, or it might have been a sigh. It came again, louder now. It was a sigh. Carl moved to the side of the open door. His hands were icy.

He smelled cigarette smoke. There came the sound of sheets being pulled across the bed, and again there was a sigh and the sound of breathing. Carl felt his heart beating in every part of his body.

Gita breathed quickly and harshly now, the air rasping in the back of her throat — he *knew* it was Gita. Still standing against the wall outside the door, he heard heavy movements on her mattress ... and he thought he heard someone breathing. He heard someone else breathing.

Without thinking, he stepped in front of the door and looked. The odor of cigarettes and stale breath and sweat poured out at him. In the center of the bed, covered with a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

white sheet, a huge slug-shaped form methodically rose and fell. Grossman.

Grossman.

An arm waved back the sheet. Through the thick, dim air, he recognized the shape of the face that turned toward him. "Hiya, Carl. Keeping hard?"

A picture of Carl winked through his own mind: slack-faced, open-mouthed, trying to suck air into lungs that felt heavy as clay.

"Give me another minute, willya, Carl? I was just passing by and wanted to get my flute played."

Carl ran out of the house, back to his car, and locked himself inside. He heard himself saying over and over, "Why? Why that? Why that? Why?" He got the key in the ignition on the first try, but then he stopped, still not thinking, and turned the rearview mirror so he could see himself. He didn't know why he did it. Then when he tried to start the car, he turned on the radio by accident.

"*Kiss it quick, before it flies away,*" someone screamed over a noise like thunder. "*Kiss it quick, we gon' die anyway, yah-yah.*" Carl stabbed at buttons until the voice stopped. When he got the car started, he floored it.

Carl thought he was going to cry — there was a hot fullness behind his eyes — but nothing happened. He roared down a busy street, refusing to slow for anything. People on foot dodged aside. Peripherally he saw their white neon-lit faces turn as he sped by. Later — he couldn't have said how much later — he stopped by the ocean. His thoughts had been running in a repetitive loop: "Grossman — Give me another minute, willya, Carl — get my flute played — Gita." Over and over, hundreds of times. Then, parked on a cliff above the ocean, he opened the windows to the cold air and breathed.

When he was able to think, it occurred to him that Grossman had probably forced her, threatening her with losing her job — or worse. It occurred to him that it was now that she needed him, more now than any other time. He slapped his head. "How could I be so goddamned stupid?" He backed out of the overlook point and drove quickly back to Gita's house; it seemed to take forever. It took twenty minutes.

His feet moved over the slushy gravel. Still, there were no lights in the house. The angle of the moon had declined, so the spots of light beneath the grape leaves on the small wooden table were thinner and fewer.

Carl paused before opening the door — since he was not expected this time, he decided to take care. He opened the door silently and left it slightly ajar. Like a shadow, he drifted through the dark globs of furniture to

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the hallway. He listened. There was no noise. Even the faraway traffic noises had stilled. On the walls, his legs made triangular shadows, and then, once again, he stood outside her door. Again, he listened. Nothing. Not a breath. In a way, he hoped Grossman would be there — sitting in a corner chair smoking a cigarette, a few snide words to say, comfortably naked, sitting there with his power, confident that it would protect him — Carl wondered how close he might come to killing him.

Carl moved slowly around the doorframe and looked toward the bed. The mattress was covered only by a tightly stretched sheet, and in the middle of it, Gita sat up on her knees, her hands between her legs, holding her crotch. Grossman was not there. Gita sat there, rocking a little, gloom gathering around her like a blackened sooty aura, and she was looking straight toward him, her head tilted down a little and to the side. Barely, he could tell that she was smiling. Then she began a kind of close-mouth laugh. She stared up at him, never parting her lips, and gurgled a low throaty laugh. She fell back, and with her hands, she opened herself for him. In the dim room, he saw the teeth between her lips, and with her mouth still that way, she laughed with a noise half between a hiss and a hum.

Carl stared at her as she writhed. He stared at her an age.

After a while, he understood that he was in hell.

Sunrise looked like a cheap movie set. The sun rose like an orange disk of paper against a tissue sky. Carl had driven to the top of a barren crag on the outskirts of the city to wait for morning. As he had driven away from Gita's house, he knew what he was going to do before he drove north, alone. But he had to wait till morning.

The flat sun finally dragged itself into the smoggy sky. The taller buildings of the city and the endless mosaic of suburban roofs appeared to be only a dozen yards away — like small cardboard models. On the crumbling freeways, toy cars moved slowly, piloted by toy people with toy ideas that must have seemed very important to their toy heads.

Carl kept thinking of Grossman. Grossman had opened his eyes. Grossman had peeled away the last shred of illusion that the world was anything other than a shithole. Carl was amazed at how long it had taken him to see the obvious. Bicchel had seen it a long time ago and had adjusted to it with his lyrical nihilism. As Carl drove down from the crag, back into the city, on his way to Grossman's house to express thanks for his lesson, he felt very clean and very proper. At last he saw himself clearly in the world, and it made sense. At last, everything made sense.

He stopped off at a liquor store in

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

a low neighborhood, bought a bottle of vodka, had a little conversation with the clerk, and then when the clerk turned his back, Carl broke the bottle over his head and stole the gun he knew would be under the counter. Now he was ready to meet Mr. Grossman and express thanks.

Grossman had a butler. He was a short, thin man with short, thinning hair and a mole as large as his eye on his right earlobe. Carl noticed that the man tried to conceal a chrome tweezers in his left hand. "Come this way," the man said. "Mr. Grossman is expecting you."

Carl felt suddenly very uncomfortable. There was little else the butler could have said that would have made him so uneasy. The pistol in his belt seemed to grow heavier and fatter with every step he took through the house.

The house smelled of money. There was an open case of mottled green Chinese bronze incense burners. In the living room, most of one wall was covered by a parchment-colored tapestry that showed flat-faced Renaissance women doing needlework among faded peacocks. The butler pulled open a wide sliding glass door. Grossman stood in the backyard, on the far side of a sparkling swimming pool, a green hose in hand, watering a bed of portulacas. The air in the yard was morning-cool and smelled of moist earth. Grossman wore a white gauze shirt and pants and smoked one of his Filipino cigarettes.

"You didn't waste any time getting here," Grossman said, not turning to look at Carl. "I expected you either in the middle of the night or later today, sometime after lunch." Grossman adjusted the stream out of the hose to a fine spray. "You give these things too much water and they stop blooming," he said. He half-turned toward Carl and smiled. He continued watering.

Carl glanced around the backyard. The pool was surrounded by lush foliage, several sling chairs, and a bamboo cage of multicolored finches who were silent. The yard was very private.

"Laurence? Bring out the lemonade, please."

The butler went back into the house, noisily closing the sliding door behind him.

"I wanted to thank you for something before I leave to go north."

"Thank me? What would you want to thank me for?" Grossman turned his attention to a passionflower vine. He picked dead leaves from it.

"I want to thank you for making the truth obvious to me. The world, when I was a child, yesterday, spread out around me like a dream — beautiful, new, with all the possibilities for joy. But there's no joy here."

"Welcome to the club." Grossman sprayed the vine.

"There's no love, nothing's certain,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

there's no peace, and I don't have to act like a human being any longer." He took out the pistol.

Grossman meticulously sprayed the vine, wetting it from every angle. He did not look toward Carl.

"I can do whatever I want now. I can do anything."

"Well," Grossman said, "let's say that you're *freer*. Let's not get a fat head over your new theology. Even I can't do anything. I've got money, I've got a few people in the police department...." He leaned his face close to the vine and picked off a bug and examined it between his fingers before crushing it. "I've got a few bush-league politicians," he continued, still not seeing the gun, "and I've got a few politicians who aren't so bush league. And I've got a few people in Washington in the government who don't have to answer anybody's questions. And with all that, even *I* can't do *any*thing." Grossman glanced at Carl, saw the gun, and continued spraying with the hose.

"As far as you're concerned," Carl said, "I can do anything. I'm going to do it, too — to you."

"Why's that? Because I weenie-popped your girlfriend?"

"Because you're evil. What you taught me, people don't need to know. They shouldn't know. People shouldn't know they don't have to be human. You let them know that. That's why you're evil."

Grossman was laughing. "*Evil?* In this time? In this country? You have the fucking nerve to tell me I'm evil? Jesus Christ. I've been called an asshole before, but no one ever had the moral rectitude to call me *evil*. The word is passé." He turned off the hose and picked up a plastic bucket of fertilizer and began scattering it in the flowers and bushes.

"Say 'Good-bye,' Grossman. More than anything, right now I want to drop your guts on your shoes."

"Picturesque. Charming talk. One last request from a man about to drop his guts on his shoes. Please note, I'm barefoot."

Carl began squeezing on the trigger. The metal under his finger was hot.

"One last answer, please, Carl. Tell me, what is your honest feeling about me. In a sentence. Fifteen words or less." He tossed fertilizer at the ivy that grew on the back fence. His back would be easy to hit.

"You *need* to die, Grossman. You're something that preys on people weaker than you. And you make those people prey on others."

"That's good." He was nodding exaggeratedly. "That's clear."

Carl squeezed. Something stung his back — he blinked and something struck his wrist, knocking the pistol to his feet. Carl dived for it and was struck again in the back of his head. Sev- pairs of hands hauled him upright. On either side of him, two men in well-tailored suits each held an arm. They

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

were both neatly barbered, thin-lipped, and precisely dressed. In a crowd, they would be unnoticeable.

The butler stood in front of Carl. He held a syringe in one hand, and with the other, he pried apart the eyelids of Carl's right eye. The butler's face came in and out of focus. Then everything looked normal.

"You can begin now, Mr. Grossman," the butler said.

The two men released Carl. His wrist throbbed and the back of his head hurt, but other than that, he felt all right. The suited men and the butler stood near the cage of finches.

Grossman had turned off the water and put down the bucket of fertilizer. "Now, Carl," he said, "you can't just walk around and try to kill people like me — but let's forgive and forget, shall we?"

Carl began to feel very strange. The odd thing was that he felt strange and normal at the same time. He felt vaguely confused. It was true that he had just tried to shoot Grossman, and he knew why he had done it, but given the chance again, it would be one of the last things he would try ... he wondered why that was. He felt so normal.

"Forgive and forget?" Grossman repeated.

Carl nodded. "I guess." He didn't know what else to say.

"You can do whatever you want," Grossman said. "You can stay or you can go. I would suggest you stay and have lunch. Lunch will be in a couple of hours. Now, what would you like to do?"

"Um...." The drive north seemed like such a remote idea. "Stay, I guess."

"Good."

Carl sat down and Grossman walked away.

For two hours Carl thought about what he was doing. He considered standing up and leaving, but ... but it was so much work. It would be such a labor. And then, where would he go? Everything about him felt tired. Inside and out, he felt *tired.* During that two hours, he couldn't manage to think of one thing that he wanted to do that he would have the energy to get involved with. It would be easier just to sit and wait for lunch. He sat. He watched the water sparkle. He waited.

"Lunch?" Grossman asked, stooping over so that his face was near Carl's. Carl smelled the cigarette smoke about him. Grossman put a blue plastic plate in Carl's lap. "Eat this," he said. "It's lunch. I think you'll like it."

Carl ate.

"That's amazing," a deep liquid voice said. "And look at that slop. What is it?"

"Boiled and mashed cauliflower and molasses, heavily peppered. Unsweetened chocolate, and uncured olives, fresh off the tree. Laurence put it together."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"My God. You're going to kill him with stuff like that."

"This is for today only — as a demonstration."

Carl ate. It did not taste good, but what else was there to do? The olives burned the inside of his mouth, but the pain seemed to belong to someone else. He swallowed the pits. What else was there to do? Every cell, every synapse, every thought was drained of energy — only when Grossman told him to do something did he have enough strength to act.

"Phenomenal," said another voice. "And this guy hates your guts. If he felt neutral to you, or even *liked* you, I can't imagine what he'd do."

"He'd do just what he's doing now — he'd do what I told him. This drug is going to make your job a hell of a lot easier."

"What about me?" the deep voice said. "Would he do what I said? Or will he just respond to you?"

"He'll respond to any authoritative command, but I've found that subjects tend to imprint on the most common early authority they're exposed to. You want soldiers who obey orders to the letter — give them their 'vitamin' for the day, and if you tell them to fuck themselves, they'll die trying. You want Senator Jerkoff to go on the tube and tell the country what a genius the president is, slip him five milligrams in his martini and he'll do it. Tell him to do it with a cigar up his nose, and that's the way it'll get done. I could take care of a lot of your problems, you see."

"You're an artist, Grossman. A real artist. We'll pass the word up about this — leaving your name out of it."

"We want to protect you," the other voice said. "If this stuff is as good as you claim — which has yet to be confirmed — you could be our golden goose that lays the platinum eggs." There was a pause. "Look at this guy."

"You haven't seen the last of my guinea pig here," Grossman said. "Come back in two weeks. I'll give you some videotapes of a few demonstrations I have in mind for Carl here, and we can discuss terms of payment and delivery then. I want you to be very sure about what you're getting."

Carl heard feet moving away, across the deck, toward the glass doors. On the surface of the pool, several specks of floating debris were being sucked into the skimmer.

The voices were farther away when he heard them again.

"Amazing," the deep voice said. "He was a guy who really hated your guts."

"He thought his life — this part of his life, anyway — was going to be a love story. A common misunderstanding. It was just business. Everything is."

Many strange and unusual things began to happen to Carl. Some were

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

painful (he had quarter-sized scabs forming on his neck and thighs), some were peculiar (sometimes he seemed to fall from great heights), and some were interesting (he found himself doing things to women that he had only vaguely thought of doing). But his life was easy now. Even when he had to do something he did not understand, like the day he had to kiss everything on a porcelain shelf, it did not disturb him. Mr. Grossman told him it would be all right. And it was all right. Carl no longer had to judge whether he should or should not do something. All in all, it was a comfortable life, a pleasant life.

In the mornings, he would sit by Mr. Grossman's pool and watch the patternless ripples and the dead insects and dirt get pulled into the skimmer. Often he tried to concentrate on understanding what he was and what was happening to him. All the years before he came to Mr. Grossman's house seemed like a dream of boredom, periodically interrupted by the purest confusion. Now there was no boredom, no confusion, no fear. It all seemed to be just what it should be.

As he sat by the side of Mr. Grossman's pool, Laurence would bring him a glass of juice, toast with marmalade, and a vitamin. As Laurence watched, Carl would consume it all. Sometimes Carl would ask Laurence a question, in hopes of figuring out what he was and what was happening to him.

"Laurence, I think I am asleep and I'm dreaming you. Am I dreaming you?"

"It doesn't seem to me that you are, sir."

"But if I were dreaming you...." Carl thought hard. "If I were dreaming you, you wouldn't know it, would you?"

"That's a hard one, sir. But I feel very much awake at the moment." Laurence bent over and took the empty tray from Carl's lap.

Carl looked at the large black mole on Laurence's earlobe. It had tiny bristles sticking out of it.

"I'm not a good one to ask about that sort of thing, sir, but for what it's worth, a few moments ago, as I was pouring your juice, I saw a spotted dog chasing a bird across the front lawn. Did you dream that?"

"I don't remember it," Carl said.

"Well, then. There you are. If you were dreaming this, you would have known about the spotted dog, wouldn't you have?"

"I suppose."

"I wouldn't worry about being in a dream, sir. You seem quite substantial to me." Laurence plucked the napkin off Carl's lap and laid it across the tray. "Have a pleasant day at the studio, sir," he said as he went toward the sliding glass doors.

Carl stared at the water. It was clear and clean and sparkled in the morning light.

• • •

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Carl decided that he was an actor. Perhaps a great actor. But that he was somehow mentally defective in that he had no personality of his own. He was fully alive only when he left the poolside and went to the places where Grossman took him and told him to do things. He wondered if his family were wealthy. He *was* taken places in a limousine. Obviously, he had a very high standard of living.

Sometimes he was told to put on strange clothing and do strange things. When he did them, Grossman would come out of the lights and pat him on the shoulder and tell him he did well.

One other day, sitting by the pool, Carl decided that he was not an actor at all. Most likely, he was utterly insane and unable to separate fantasy from reality. As for the trips to the mountains, the airplane ride, the visions of nude women surrounding him, the time he jumped off the cliff — it was all hallucination. Pretty standard hallucinations, besides.

"Laurence, I have a serious question."

"Take your vitamin before you finish your juice, sir."

"I think I finally understand."

"Again, sir?"

"This time, I think I finally *know*."

"Certainly you do." Laurence picked up the capsule and held it out to Carl. Laurence's palm was clean and pale. "Your vitamin, sir."

"Laurence," he whispered, "I'm mad." The pool water glittered like white fire.

"Mr. Grossman will be very mad if you don't take your vitamin."

"You can tell me," Carl whispered. "It's true, isn't it?"

Laurence took the capsule and put it between Carl's lips. Then he picked up the nearly empty glass of orange juice and touched its wet rim to Carl's lips. "Drink, sir."

Carl swallowed the capsule, and before he could repeat his question, Laurence had gone back into the house.

For a long time, Carl was sure he had stumbled onto the answer.

"Laurence, are you a human being?"

"Yes, sir," he said tiredly. "Your toast is getting cold." As he waited for Carl to finish his breakfast, Laurence plucked the bristles out of his mole with a chrome tweezers.

"Laurence," Carl said shyly, "am *I* a human being?"

"What do you think, sir?"

Carl quickly ate and drank his breakfast so he could be alone to think. Laurence's cryptic answer gave him something to consider.

Now he was sure he understood what was happening to him. He was either an alien with no memory, from someplace beyond the solar system, being kept and studied, or he was a creature that had been built somewhere in a laboratory. All the things

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

he went through were tests. That explained it. He was being studied and tested. That was why Grossman was forever asking him how he felt and what he wanted to do and what things looked like and tasted like. Of course.

That explained it all. Of course.

Carl sat in his sling chair at the end of the pool, in the place where he always sat, while Grossman moved around the deck, watering his plants and dragging a green snakelike hose behind him. The morning sun rose over the fence, a blinding pale yellow. Grossman was talking.

"Are you happy, Carl? You should be happy. You have everything."

"Yes, I'm happy." He didn't know exactly why he said that. It more or less seemed like he was happy, in a funny sort of way. He watched Grossman move nearer the place where the sun came over the fence, between two holly bushes.

"We're going to have some visitors today. The two men who were here several weeks ago are coming back to see you."

"The two men who wore suits and looked alike?"

"That's right, Carl. Your memory's pretty good. Then you probably remember a woman by the name of Gita Setjac."

"I remember her." Carl looked at the ripples on the pool and then at the sun over the fence. Grossman moved closer to the light. Carl knew, in a kind of creeping up his back, that something important was about to be revealed to him.

"Gita Setjac will be here today, too." There was a noise from the sliding glass door. Grossman interrupted his watering long enough to glance over his shoulder. A man with a videotape camera and a tripod was awkwardly making his way through the door and down the two steps. "Set it up by the geraniums," Grossman said. "I'd like for the birdcage to be in the background." Grossman was moving around the pool now, moving between Carl and the sun. His head was a blaze of light. From around his head came all the light that filled the world.

"I understand now," Carl said calmly.

"What do you understand?" Grossman asked, sprinkling a pot of lavender petunias.

"I'm dead. I must have died a long time ago."

"Really?" Grossman said from inside the sun. "Am I dead, too?"

"No. You're God. I'm dead and you're God. I'm sorry I haven't understood sooner."

"No problem," Grossman said.

There was another noise from the sliding door. Carl did not take his eyes off the blazing image of Grossman, but he heard Laurence's voice saying, "The two gentlemen and the lady are here." Carl did not look at them, but peripherally he saw them

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

standing behind the cameraman.

"Carl," Grossman said, "could you repeat what you just told me?"

"Yes, sir. I understand now that I am dead and that you are God. That is why I've done everything you've told me — only I didn't know why till now. That's why I don't have any judgment. I don't have it because I don't need it anymore. When a person is dead, there isn't any need to make decisions."

"Good thinking, Carl. Gentlemen?"

"We're impressed," the deep liquid voice said. "You have some tapes for us?"

"Yes," Grossman said. "Tapes and a final demonstration. I wouldn't want you to think the tapes weren't genuine, so I have a little something set up here for you to see, in the flesh, so to speak. Keep in mind," he said as he coiled up the hose in a raised bed of philodendrons, "this is on a maintenance of only two milligrams a day." He came around the pool. Although the fire no longer radiated from him, Carl knew that Grossman was still God.

"Gita?" Grossman said. "Come sit over here, where Carl is sitting. Carl, you stand beside her. Roll the camera, Frank."

Carl did as he was told. Gita sat primly beside him. Her dark hair was neatly parted in the middle and fell on each side of her face. She looked up once at Carl. Her face was as blank as paper — but a second later, a faint, puzzled smile touched her lips.

"We're dead?" she whispered. "Grossman is God?"

Carl nodded.

"I didn't understand until you said it. Now it makes sense." She nodded also. "I thought I was crazy." She smiled a little more. "It's quite a relief to know I'm not crazy." She tilted her head back down. Carl touched her hair; he hoped no one would see. He was not sure that God would approve.

"Laurence, you have everything? Good. Stand on the other side of the woman there. Right. Very nice." Grossman positioned himself in front of the three of them, still out of camera range. His white suit was radiant in the morning light. "Now, Laurence?"

The servant held a rosewood tray toward Carl. A white napkin concealed a low lumpy object. Laurence, with his free hand, pulled back the cloth. On the napkin lay one of the finches, a gray and red one. It was alive, though it had several rubber bands around it to constrain its feet and wings. With an eye like a black bead, it stared at Carl.

"Take the bird in your hand."

Carl did so.

"Crush it."

Carl crushed it. The bird made no noise.

"Big deal," said the man with the liquid voice.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Just a warm up," Grossman said. "Laurence?"

Laurence held another rosewood tray in front of Carl. Again there was a napkin. He folded it back. A small black revolver lay on the cloth. Carl thought he had seen it somewhere before, but he couldn't remember where.

Grossman was smiling. He held his hands behind his back. "Carl? Do you know this woman?"

Carl nodded.

"You were in love with her once?"

"I think I was."

"Do you dislike this woman now?"

Carl looked at his hand. He was still holding the bird. It was an ugly mess of feathers and blood.

"Carl? Do you dislike this woman?"

Carl shook his head.

"Take the gun in your hand, Carl. Forget about the bird. It's dead just like you are. Drop it."

When Carl dropped it, it fell into the pool. It began moving toward the skimmer.

"Now take the gun like I told you. Point it at the woman's head."

"Wait a minute," the deep voice said.

"Don't worry," Grossman said. "She's in the country illegally, she has no family, no friends to speak of — she won't be missed."

"What about him? He'll remember it, won't he?"

"An hour from now, he won't be remembering anything." He paused and opened his arms expansively. "Look, you guys, I just want you to know you're getting quality pharmaceuticals here. No bullshit. I have some of the country's best chemists working for me — working without humanitarian restraints. That's why we can advance so quickly. This is just the beginning. In a couple of years, we'll have an item that will make your silly wars obsolete. My chemists are going to make your boss's job a lot easier."

"Mr. Grossman?" Carl asked softly. The blood on his hand was drying and sticking his skin to the gun. His hand was a mottle of red and flesh around the black gun.

"What?"

"Mr. Grossman, if we're dead...." He thought hard. "Then we're metaphysical."

"Sure we are. What the hell."

"Everything here is metaphysical, then."

"You got it, Carl." He was grinning. "The whole shitaree is metaphysical. Nice, huh? You're slipping there. Hold it right above her ear."

"This is a metaphysical gun, then."

Grossman sighed heavily. "Carl, God is telling you to pay attention to what I'm telling you. Hold the gun above her ear."

Carl pointed the gun at Grossman. He thought hard. "No one could hurt God with an ordinary gun. But this is a metaphysical gun."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"What the fuck are you doing? What the fuck are you up to, Carl? You know, if you even think about killing God, God gets real pissed off." Grossman moved back a step. "If you know what's good for you, you'll do as God says, Carl." He stood on the raised lip of the pool. "Why are you doing this? I made you happy. You're happy, Carl."

"You make things die. You made me die. You make everything die." The blood on Carl's hand was dry now, and his skin stuck to the gunmetal.

"That's just the way I am, Carl. Try to understand." Grossman glanced at the two men in dark suits and then back at Carl. "Do something," he hissed. No one moved. "Stop this guy," he whispered.

"It's your experiment," said a deep voice.

"I remember a man with no colored parts in his eyes," Carl said. "I remember I saw him standing in the sun. He was with a woman." He frowned. "For some reason, I remember, they didn't have their clothes on and they were getting sunburned. They were going to be hurt and killed for some reason. You do lots of things like that."

Grossman talked through his teeth: "*Move on him.* Take this guy out."

Carl sighted along the top of the gun at Grossman's mouth. "You're God and I'm dead and I have a metaphysical gun." He pulled the trigger.

Grossman fell back into the pool and came up splashing and screaming; he was unhurt. Carl walked to the edge of the pool, aimed down at Grossman's open mouth, and said, "I never wanted to be an angel of death."

He pulled the trigger again. A spray of red showered over the surface of the shimmering pool. Grossman stopped thrashing. His feet came up from the bottom of the pool, and he floated on the surface, moving slowly toward the skimmer.

Carl and Gita stared at the body.

"He looks little," Gita said. "What do we do now?"

"Leave, I guess." He looked around the garden. "Where did everyone go?" The camera was gone. Only they and the birds in the bamboo cage remained. They began to twitter. The water glittered, and the green plants that rose up around them seemed to glow with an inner illumination. "Why don't we leave?"

No one appeared to stop or question them. On the front porch they met Bicchel. His face was as rumpled as his clothes.

"What the hell's been—" He stared at them. "Jesus H. Christ," he said in an exhalation. "What's Grossman been feeding you? You look like shit. Can you make it out to my car?" He didn't wait for an answer. He put Gita's hand in Carl's and then led Carl to the car.

"All I can tell you," Bicchel said to

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

them as he drove, "is that when I saw one of those tapes that came over my desk, one with Gita in it, and the next afternoon, one with Carl, I knew Grossman was moving into a new phase. *I* could do some of those things, but I knew Carl couldn't."

He turned onto one of the northbound freeways. a derelict staggered into the lane, and Bicchel awkwardly swerved to miss him.

"And then there were the rumors. The story I heard last night made my skin creep — and it smelled just like Grossman and just like the tape I had reviewed that day. It's time the two of you got some country air."

Over the period of a month, Gita and Carl slowly awakened and started regaining some of the weight they had lost. There wasn't much they remembered clearly, but what they did recall, they did not discuss.

They lived together several years, then they went their separate ways. They agreed that even when they were together, they felt alone. The parts of them that had once drawn them together had been destroyed. Eight months after they parted, Carl saw her one overcast day in Golden Gate Park. She was standing beside a reedy pond, watching a pair of geese preen each other. He stood beside her. She recognized him almost before turning. Without pause for thought, Carl said, "I would rather be alone with you than without you."

Gita nodded. "I know."

It was late in the day. He took her hand and they walked back to the path and left the park with the rest of the people.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Jennifer Black was born in West Wales and started writing at the age of seventeen and publishing at the age of nineteen. "Since then I have sold a number of stories and articles to various publications under various names. 'Memories of Gwynneth' is my first sf story and the first of many, I hope." "Memories of Gwynneth" is a poignant story of a love . . . remembered.

Memories of Gwynneth

BY
JENNIFER BLACK

The ancient inhabitants of my world of Cymru had cut the image of a human into the hillside; white chalk lines scribed into the green. This giant wields a club, and some people say it represents a curse, reproaching humans forever. Whether this is true we don't know, because there are no Cymrans left to tell us. The giant frowns down on the canal, and on the tiny settlement of Barth.

When the barge drifted into shadow, I slapped the water to warn Paris to brake before the bow slammed into the lock gate. I shouted, "Is anyone there?"

It was some minutes before I caught sight of a face peering down at me. Then the gates began to open. Paris swam on, the towrope tightened, and we inserted ourselves between the walls of the lock. The water began to rise. As the barge reached ground level, I looked around at my new surroundings, which consisted of a tall cottage, Cymran-built and so narrow that it looked as though it had just popped out of the lock itself, a closely-shaved lawn with a fringe of flowers, an abundance of white paint, and a grotesque human figure.

At first I thought he was a hunchback, but then I saw he was not so much humped as twisted. His body faced upstream, but his head and shoulders were turned to me as if he intended to make a telling point before leaving. He looked about sixty years old.

"Hello," I said quickly, in case he did intend to leave. "I'm Jilly Asher Fishwoman." I am a townie, and my name says it all.

His expression, which had been merely unfriendly, now became mur-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

derous. He grunted, his narrowed eyes taking me in. I'm twenty-seven years old, I have a good figure, and townies say I'm pretty, but clearly the lockkeeper didn't like what he saw. He grunted again and nodded, as though his worst fears had been confirmed.

"The fish will be here in a few moments," I said. "They're not far behind."

He spoke at last. "Well, why in hell didn't you tell me before?" he said. "Now I'll have to open the gate again."

All right, so I was new to the job, and I'd never been to Barth before, and I'd been warned that the bumpkins — who embrace the extinct Cymran culture to the extent of living in their ancient dwellings — were insular. But I was well trained for my new job, and I'd taken the trouble to have a memory implant, and I had a short fuse. I jumped ashore and confronted the man. "Isn't that your job?"

"It's been a dry spring. We can't afford to waste water through foolishness."

"Well, I'm bloody sorry." I was about to tell him that, as a lockkeeper, he was somewhat lower in the pecking order than I, when a memory slipped into my mind.

I saw a drought, and the upper reaches of the ancient Cymran canal almost dry, and the fish unable to reach the processing plant. I saw the mud littered with silver, and the delfin herders aground, panting.

I should have searched that memory before I opened my mouth. "I'm very sorry," I said, moderating my tone.

I watched in silence as he released the water. Soon the lower surface of the canal danced in the sunlight like a child's sparkler, and the fish were there, jumping and twisting as the delfins drove more and more of them into the narrow confines of the lock. Soon the entire shoal was there. The lockkeeper shut the lower gate, and the water rose. I could see Zeus down there; big, with that deep scar running down his flank that—

Was the result of a dreadful accident when he got trapped between the closing gate and — I shut the implanted memory off. It was too painful, the poor emotive creature crushed, squealing in agony, *the blood.* . . . This memory had burned itself into my predecessor's brain, which was not surprising, considering the emotive bond between delfin and fishwoman. And now I had inherited it, together with all her other work-connected memories. I would have to make sure it didn't slip into my thoughts too often. Such a memory could sicken a girl, and put her off her work. Perhaps the editing program should have removed it before I received my implant — but probably it was considered a useful warning to me; to watch the gates.

The other delfins were there, too:

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

four of them smaller than Zeus and subordinate to him: Athena, Aphrodite, Diana, and Hera — goddesses all. They floated quietly at the surface, exhaling mistily, and Zeus nuzzled Paris, who lay harnessed to my little barge. It was a peaceful scene, yet I was aware of uncertainty emanating from them. At the time, I attributed this to my newness. They needed a few days to get used to me.

I also had the feeling that the lockkeeper was averting his eyes from the scene, although this may have been an impression given by his twisted body. Soon the water reached the top of the lock, and he leaned to the upstream gate. The fish streamed out, followed by the delfins. Paris began to move, too, and I had to make an undignified leap aboard my barge, which rocked dangerously. The lockkeeper looked me up and down.

"You've got a lot to learn," he said.

I wanted to remind him that I had all the technical knowledge and memories of Gwynneth, but I resisted the temptation. Bumpkins have old-fashioned views, which is why they've chosen their rural way of life.

During the past few days, I'd been thinking of Dylan a lot. In fact, ever since the implant I'd been thinking of him, on and off. He was a personal memory of Gwynneth's that had somehow slipped through the editing process, so I was stuck with him.

He was tall and dark-haired; not exactly handsome, but his face seemed to radiate an enormous strength. His brow was high and his eyes deep; he looked sensitive as well as strong. He was the kind of man that a woman would be happy to spend the rest of her life with, and I looked forward to meeting him. . . .

When I reached the fish pens, everything was in order. The delfins had locked the gates and were basking in the shallows. A man emerged from the door of the processing factory and strode down the towpath toward me. His appearance was familiar, of course, and his face had that slightly lumpy look of the true bumpkin.

I held out my hand. "You're Walter Trevithick, the plant manager."

He blinked in surprise. "And you must be Jilly Asher Fishwoman," he said. "You're a townie, come to live with us. A renegade." We exchanged pleasantries for a while, but he wasn't concentrating. He kept glancing at me searchingly, as though looking for antennae. Finally his curiosity got the better of him and he asked, "What's it *like*?"

"Not as strange as you'd think. This place, you, the canal: I feel as though I've known them a long time, yet I've never seen them before. But there's nothing mystical about it. It's not creepy, like déjà vu can be. And all the personal memories and emo-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tions are edited out. Although," I continued, as the image of Dylan flashed into my mind again, "the process isn't perfect. The editing program can be fooled. After all, the human mind is complex, and human emotions more complex still."

"I suppose so . . . ." He thought of me as a different species; I could sense it. "But someone else's thoughts sitting there in your head — it's weird. And you're a pretty girl, for a townie. Why did you do it?"

I laughed. "It doesn't inhibit my sex life. Really, it's no different than learning from a book. You simply absorb someone else's ideas — then when you want to remember something from them, you do. I *know* you, and the layout of your plant, the geography of the fish pens . . . ."

He said quietly, "You know me, but what do you think of me?"

"Well, I haven't known you long enough—" *Nice man, fatherly, bit of a fusser, clean, wouldn't mind if one day we found ourselves in bed . . . .* The editing program had slipped up again. I flushed; I couldn't help it, and he saw.

"No editing program could completely separate human memories from human emotions," he said. You'll have to be careful to keep your own emotions separate from Gwynneth's." Then, letting me off the hook, he asked, "Was she in much pain?"

"No. They can take care of that, in the city."

An electric truck purred out of the plant gate and stopped. It was loaded with fish cake — protein cake, the Fishways Commission preferred to call it — for distribution. That truck was probably the only motorized vehicle in the region, energy being as scarce as it was on Cymru. Walter Trevithick emerged from his thoughts. "It's good to have you with us, Jilly. I hope you enjoy your stay in Barth. You must make allowances for us — townies and bumpkins seem to grow farther apart each year, and perhaps you'll provide a bridge between us. Nothing's really changed here in the past couple of hundred years," he smiled. "Although my grandfather did have a hovercar."

I was accustomed to public transport, and foresaw problems for myself. "How do you get around?"

"On foot like everyone else, except those who like riding horses, and a few of the younger ones with bicycles."

"I wonder . . . could I get a ride to the village in the truck? I have to find accommodation for myself. And I want to visit Jonathan Hughes."

"Gwynneth's father? He lives at the far end of the village in the old gatehouse. I'll ask Len to drop you off there."

As we walked to the truck, I said casually, "And Dylan. Sometime I must look up Dylan."

He looked puzzled. "Dylan who?"

"Oh . . . just Dylan. Do you know, I

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

can't remember his other name. I met him in the city, and he said he came from these parts." *Why am I lying?* I wondered. *Why not simply say, 'Dylan was a friend of Gwynneth's and I can't get him out of my mind'?*

"I don't know any Dylan around here," he said.

It was sybaratic in the truck: just Len and I with all that power at our command. I felt as though I were committing a crime against Austerity, effortlessly slipping through the country lanes among fields of sheep and cattle. . . . Bumpkins still preferred an old-fashioned diet, obviously. I saw a couple of cyclists, but everyone else was on foot. I'd have to get used to walking myself.

Jonathan Hughes's place was frighteningly impressive: an ancient Cymran pile, all weathered granite with arches and chimneys and a turret that might have contained an incarcerated damsel. It was not until I'd walked under the arch in search of a doorway that I saw the main building half a kilometer, and about ten thousand sheep, away. As Walter had said, Jonathan Hughes's place was merely the gatehouse. The main building was some kind of a Cymran castle.

I found the door but no bell, so I pounded on the heavy wood with my fist. A wraithlike intellectual appeared, smiling gently. The door wasn't even locked, and I began to realize I was going to enjoy my life in Barth, after the barely suppressed violence and enforced competitiveness of the city.

"I'm Jilly Asher Fishwoman," I said.

"Jonathan Hughes. I've been expecting you. So nice of you to call." He took me into a room walled with real books. I sat down and he brought me a glass of amber, fiery liquid, sat down himself, and broke the awkward silence by saying, "So you're the replacement for Gwynneth" — which didn't exactly set any conversational ball rolling.

"I . . . I'd like to say how sorry. . . ."

"It's all right. I've got over it." But he was thin almost to the point of invisibility, and somehow I knew Gwynneth's mother had died a long time ago. The life expectancy of bumpkins is quite short.

"Gwynneth didn't suffer," I said. "We saw to that."

"She suffered while she was here, for almost a year. I was so glad when we heard that someone had applied for her position and wanted a memory implant. That assured that she'd be taken care of, in the city."

I dug into my bag and handed him the small casket "Here you are. At least it's something."

He stared at it. "What's this?" The casket was a pink cube with gold scrollwork and the legend SWEET MEMORIES on the lid. Suddenly I was ashamed of it. I wished it had looked different. He opened it and pulled

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

out the collapsible headphone. "What on earth is it?" he asked again. It might have been an appropriate gift for a widowed truck driver, but not for this sensitive aesthete.

"It's your daughter's memories," I said.

His face was expressionless. "In here?"

"I was indoctrinated with Gwynneth's business memories as part of my training. The personal memories are returned to the next of kin."

"Like ashes?"

"Well, yes, I suppose you could look at it like that. But it's a little more . . . alive than ashes. You put the headphone over your temples and. . ." I heard my voice trail away. He had no intention of putting the headphone over his temples. He looked more as though he might put it under his foot. "Listen," I said desperately, "I didn't mean to offend you. A lot of people get comfort out of their loved ones' memories."

He stuffed the headphone back into the casket, shut the lid with a snap, and put it on the table. "My daughter's memories are her own business," he said, and from the way he looked at me, I knew he was resenting the fact that I had a whole raft of Gwynneth's memories floating in my own head. "But thank you for bringing them," he said, seeing my face.

I swallowed. "Tell me about her."

He did. Without hesitation he described to me a daughter who had been an only child whose mother had died when she was nine, who had spent her life helping her ex-townie father to maintain his dream of rural living, who had excelled at school but had refused the chance of a city scholarship and accepted the post of Barth Fishwoman to be near her father, and who'd died at the age of forty because she'd allowed her disease to go too far . . . because she didn't want to alarm her father. He spoke steadily and displayed no open emotion. He made things easy for me. He left one thing out, and when he'd finished, I asked him.

"Did she have any . . . boyfriends?"

"Lovers? I expect so. She was an attractive woman, and very popular in the village. We never talked much about that side of things. I always hoped it wasn't me who'd stopped her marrying. A lot of bumpkins marry, you know. I asked her once, and she laughed and said not to worry, she would marry when she found the right man. But she never did find him."

Daughters don't tell their fathers everything. I smiled, to try to alleviate any impression that I was grilling him. "So she never mentioned any names."

"Never, not that I recall."

Not Dylan, *Dylan of the muscular arms and young, wise face; the sudden smile and blue eyes.*

"I wish I'd known her better," I said.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"You know her better than anyone," he said. Then, before I left, he asked curiously, "What prompted you to leave the city, Jilly?"

I glanced out the window. A knot of children passed on their way from school, laughing, safe. Beyond them, Cymran cattle grazed.

"What prompted you?" I asked.

I found lodgings with a dear old lady called, quaintly, Mrs. Bramble, who seemed to have been looking for a surrogate daughter for some time. She gave me a neat little room with a window that looked down the valley to the plant, the canal, and the Cymran giant on the hillside. She smiled as she showed me the room, knowing I'd like it. Everything in there had flowers on it: the counterpane, the wallpaper, the carpet, Mrs. Bramble's dress. Everything was clean and perfumed. The city was a long ways off.

"I often take a walk down to the pub after dinner," she told me. "Just for a glass of sherry. Perhaps you'd like to join me."

I would have liked to, but I had a lot of stuff to sort out, so I told her I'd go the next night.

However, the following day my first problems began. I'd been at the plant, checking the pens and doing a few tests in my tiny laboratory. The delfins had left that morning and would be returning with the fish from the distribution ponds in midafternoon. Time passed quickly, and suddenly I found it was four o'clock, and still no fish. I called on Walter Trevithick.

"I've heard nothing," he said. "Perhaps you should get on down to the lock. Old Bill Price isn't too fit, not with that back of his. Perhaps he couldn't get the gate open."

I felt myself flush with anger. I had scant sympathy for that surly character. "Perhaps he should retire," I said. This was my first day on the job and someone was fouling things up for me. Walter glanced at me but said nothing, and I jumped into the barge and urged Paris to full speed. We surged down the canal.

We hadn't gone far when a shoal of fish passed under the scow on their way to the plant, followed by my five delfin herders. It was a very small shoal, though, so I continued on. Something had gone seriously wrong, and we'd lost half our fish. When I reached the dock, Bill Price was there, leaning on the gate and watching me.

"What happened?" I asked.

It was a long time before he answered, because he seemed to find absorbing interest in a leaf that came to rest beside his left foot. At last he said, "You're the expert, townie. You tell me."

"Just let me know what you saw."

"I saw the fish come as usual," he said reluctantly, "but they didn't all get into the dock, and a lot of them

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

went back downstream."

"You shut the lock gate too soon!"

"Don't go telling me my business, Fishwoman."

I stormed off, intending to talk to Walter, but by the time I reached the plant, everything was closed up for the night. I rode home on Mrs. Bramble's ancient bicycle, picked at my dinner, and again refused my landlady's offer of companionship at the pub. I needed time to think; time to dig into the memories of Gwynneth to see if I'd left out some detail of delfin care that had caused my charges to lose interest in their job. *Hera likes to have her tail tickled. Zeus won't enter the lock until the gates are completely open, ever since. . . . Blood, pain, sorrow.* I racked my brains, came up with nothing, and finally decided the solution was quite simple: the delfins needed time to get used to me. Meanwhile I would make sure I was present at the lock when they passed through.

The work had unleashed other memories. As I tried to get to sleep, the face of Dylan kept slipping before my mind's eye: *Dylan laughing, Dylan brushing the hair from his eyes, squinting against the sun; Dylan brooding, watching me with those deep-set eyes.* Love thoughts of Dylan, Dylan. I couldn't get rid of them. They had been Gwynneth's and now they were mine. In my condition of near sleep, I had the fanciful notion that Dylan was Gwynneth's gift to me.

But in the morning I doubted Dylan existed. Maybe Gwynneth was mad, and Dylan a fantasy figure, invented by a woman starved of sex, devoting her life to her father. Stranger memories have emerged from the implant program.

It was not until Sunday that Mrs. Bramble finally succeeded in dragging me to the pub. I'd had the worst week of my life. The quantity of fish brought in by my herders had dwindled day by day, until by Friday it was hardly worth Walter's while to fire up the plant. Fortunately the cake had been stockpiled at the various outlets, but it could not last forever. I spent the days at the lock under the jaundiced eye of Bill Price, the evenings searching through Gwynneth's memories — it's astonishing how much a person learns in forty years, and much of that is trivia — and my nights dreaming about Dylan, the probably imaginary Dylan.

"You're looking like Death himself, my dear," said Mrs. Bramble that Sunday night. "You need a break."

After an embarrassing first few minutes in the Smith's Arms while all present scrutinized the incompetent townie in silence, matters improved. People began to ask me about the city, which many of them had never seen, and for a while I forgot my problems. In the end, however, talk turned to the fish.

"Aye," said some old sage, nodding wisely, "Gwynneth had a way

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

with delfins. Delfins are sensitive animals, you know. You've got to treat them just right. It takes experience."

Now Jonathan Hughes spoke up from his chair in the corner. "Jilly has all of my daughter's experience, and more." He signaled to me. "Can I buy you a drink, Jilly?" And when I sat beside him, he said, "I'd like to thank you for bringing Gwynneth's memories. I'm sorry if I was a bit abrupt the other day."

We talked a while; and then, sensing an ally, I came out with something that had been on my mind all week. "You don't suppose the lockkeeper is . . . mentally bothering the delfins in any way? He's been pretty damned hostile."

He smiled. "Bill Price? Never. He looks on those animals as pets. Didn't anyone ever tell you about the accident to Zeus?"

Blood. Pain. "No."

"It happened a few years ago, one spring. We'd had a lot of rain, and the canal was in danger of overflowing." He paused, sorting out the events methodically. "The lock gates needed repair. The way Gwynneth told it, part of the lower gates broke away while the delfins were passing through the upper gates into the lock. The level dropped suddenly, and the water began to rush through the upper gates. They swung shut. and Zeus was crushed between them. Bill Price and his son couldn't get the gates open —the pressure of the floodwater was so strong. The lock was like a waterfall, and the meadows below began to flood."

I could imagine it: Zeus pinned between the gates, drowning in agony. "How did they free him?"

"Bill and his son climbed out with a heavy jack and got it between the gates. They began to lever them open. They could see Zeus about a meter below the surface. Then suddenly he was free, but the water, rushing through, built up too much pressure and the lower gates got carried away. That put all the pressure on the upper gates, and they went, too — and Bill and his son with them."

He watched me, gauging the effect. "They found Bill about a kilometer downstream. His back was broken. We patched him up in our little hospital, but we don't have facilities like the city."

"And . . . his son?"

"They never found him. Funny," he said, "you'd think an experience like that would put a man off delfins for life, but not Bill. Gwynneth said he talks to them like humans, and they actually come to the surface to listen. She said he had a stronger emotive bond with them than she had."

I said slowly, "I'm going to try to come to terms with Bill Price."

He chuckled. "Take him a beef pie. That's what Gwynneth used to do, whenever he got into one of his moods."

One other thing happened that

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

evening. As I stood to leave, I caught sight of a photograph on the wall. It was the Barth soccer team of some years ago; the back row standing with folded arms, the front row kneeling, the ball in the middle. One face I recognized. It was a muscular young man with deep-set eyes, smiling into the camera.

"Who's that?" I asked Jonathan.

He examined the print. "Oh, that's Bill's son." He regarded me strangely. "I suppose you picked him out of Gwynneth's memories."

I looked again at the face, and was aware of the dead heaviness of disappointment.

I timed my visit carefully. I wanted a few minutes with Bill Price before the fish arrived. In the bright afternoon sunlight, the lock possessed a toylike neatness, and the hillside giant looked as though he had been carved in silver. Bill Price took a few hesitating steps toward me, body twisted and poised as though for flight, like an injured bird. It was Monday of a clean new week. He looked at me wordlessly. I handed him the pie; a simple, practical thing that a lonely man would appreciate, suggested by another lonely man who had accepted me more readily.

"Thank you," he mumbled, then brought his eyes up to mine. "I'm bloody sorry," he said. "I've been a bloody fool."

"So have I. I should have made allowances. I didn't know about your son."

"You didn't?" He shrugged slightly, as though my not knowing was an irrelevance. "I resented you having Gwynneth's memories," he said. "I resented you knowing everything about us — you, a stranger and a townie. And . . . yes, my son had something to do with it. I resented you knowing all about him. When Gwynneth died, I'd have liked some of those memories to have stayed private."

"They are private. Jonathan Hughes has them, and he won't view them. I have only technological stuff." I lied for his sake.

"I know that now. I didn't understand the procedure, that's all."

We stood in the sun for a while, not talking, and soon the surface of the lower canal fragmented into ripples.

Bill Price threw himself against the gate, and I helped him. The fish began to stream into the lock. Then came the delfins. Bill knelt and slapped the water, and they rose and went to him with joyous squeaks. Their delight was a palpable aura, making me feel good, too. Zeus slid onto the bank and Bill caressed him and gave him meat from a bucket. The scar on Zeus's flank was very deep, but well healed. Bill fed the other delfins and patted their heads. He looked up at me, a smile transforming his face so that he suddenly

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

looked much younger.

"They need a man's touch, too," he said.

"I can see that." I found tears in my eyes; I'm not sure why. He'd hurt himself as much as the delfins, feeding them with his resentment instead of the meal they'd come to expect. They'd reacted, losing interest in their job. Now they plunged away, rounding up straggling fish, working as a team, happiness showing in every movement. When all the fish were safely in the lock, Zeus leaped high in the air with sheer exuberance. We shut the gates, the water rose, then we opened the upper gates. The silver tide flowed upstream. We sat on the gate, in the sun. My tears had dried, stiffening my skin, and I rubbed my face surreptitiously, but Bill wasn't watching. He was regarding the chalk giant pensively; then he spoke quietly, almost to himself:

Through throats where many rivers meet, the curlews cry,
Under the conceiving moon, on the high chalk hill,
And there this night I walk in the white giant's thigh,
here barren as boulders women lie longing still.

Then he looked at me. "It reminds me of him, and it reminds me of her, and of this place," he said. "I could never live anywhere else."

"What is it?"

"Just an old poem from Wales, on Earth." He smiled. "Gwynneth loved poetry, but Emrys never had any time for it."

"Emrys?"

"My son."

I stared at him. "Who is Dylan?"

"A Welsh poet, from way back. Dylan Thomas — is that the Dylan you mean? He wrote 'In the White Giant's Thigh.' She loved the Welsh poets, Gwynneth did, and best of all she loved Dylan Thomas. In the evenings we'd sit here, and with the moon on the hillside, it seemed we'd step right back in time, to a place we'd never seen. I tell you something — if I'd not been all crippled up like this, I'd have asked her to marry me. I was plucking up courage just before the accident."

The whole world paused, waiting for me to collect my thoughts. Carefully, I said, "Did Emrys like her?"

"Emrys hardly knew her. He lived over to the west, and visited only occasionally. But he'd have approved; he often said I needed a wife, and he wouldn't have minded Gwynneth as a stepmother. She was only ten years older than him." He chuckled. "But I'm just dreaming. It's easy, now, to try to fit things together like fiction. At the time it wasn't like that. I never told her how I felt; it wouldn't have been fair."

"All the same she must have liked you very much, to have spent so much time with you."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Barth Lock was on her route, like it's on yours. We'd sit and talk like you and I are talking. And occasionally I'd recite poetry to her. I think she found me amusing — a romantic dreamer. She even used to call me Dylan. With her, it was an intellectual thing. With me, I suppose it was love. But I don't have the body for love now. I couldn't have stood her saying yes, and marrying me for pity."

"People don't marry for pity." I looked at him and saw him the way Gwynneth had seen him. The way he'd looked when she first met him — and, to her, the way he'd looked ever since. Through Gwynneth's eyes his back was straight and his arms were strong and his face was young, kind, sensitive. The physical similarities to his son were very strong. I needed to say something good to him. "She would have married you for love," I said.

He watched my face. "You know that?"

"Yes."

"You're quite sure?"

"Yes."

"Thank you, Jilly." He smiled, looking at the water now, remembering the past.

After a moment or two, I left him. I didn't want him to look at my face again. He might see there a secondhand love that I would never get out of my mind, now that the memories of Gwynneth had become my own.

Handsome, Sturdy

VOLUME FILES

for Your Copies of

FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION

Each Volume File will keep 12 copies of FANTASY & SCIENCE FICTION clean, orderly and readily accessible. Sturdily built, the files are covered with a rich black and red washable leatherette, and the lettering is in 16-carat gold leaf.
Reasonably priced at $6.95 each, 3 for $20.00 or 6 for $36.00, they are shipped fully postpaid on a money back basis if not satisfactory, Order direct from:

JESSE JONES BOX CORPORATION
Dept F&SF P.O. Box 5120 Philadelphia, Pa. 19141

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Lynn Marron lives in Connecticut and has written radio and television scripts and texts for comic books. "Presently I am living alone in the woods. . . . I talk to the chipmunks, the squirrels, robins, (Spring), racoons (night), frogs (summer), fish (fast), deer (seldom), tulip trees and occasionally large, intelligent looking rocks. When the conversation slows, I go back in and type." "We Call Them Flowers" is Lynn Marron's first story for F & SF. *In it she shows that, although fads come and go,* some *fads are forever, whether you want them to be or not.*

We Call Them Flowers

BY
LYNN MARRON

It was alive, part of her, yet totally alien. It was nearly an inch and a half across, with curved layers of soft flesh petals that stood out about half an inch from her shoulder. Their delicate pink coloring paled at the touch of Adam's coarse fingers.

"Gently, Adam dear." Lina whispered. "Dr. Ingersol calls it a Saturn Rose."

"But honey, it never comes off."

"Yes." Lina allowed Adam to cradle her in his arms. After all, tonight was her night of triumph. Giddy with victory, she could put up with Adam's mauling and sour smell. "I'll have to tell Mother about us . . . about the engagement."

"Of course." Adam's hands moved up her arms.

Lina concentrated on the soft music coming from the pool dome. Even on the moon, the wealthy had their enclaves of luxurious pleasure. Now, with her marriage to Adam Macklin-Davis, this oasis of abundant water, color, and honest Earth fibers would be her world. She felt her rose warming with excitement.

"Honey — it's changing. Getting red." He sounded alarmed.

"It's deepening pink. It reflects my moods. When I get very, very angry, it turns a raging scarlet."

Adam looked away from her shoulder, looking into her eyes. She smiled as he closed his eyes, awkwardly kissing her, trying to prolong it as long as he could. Lina was careful to moan and rub his back passionately.

When finally she parted them, Adam hesitantly asked, "Shouldn't I speak to your father? At least a Visacall or something?"

Lina had found that stroking her flower's petals calmed her. "Daddy's

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

working very hard. He's Earthside now, but he travels so much it's impossible to keep up with his schedule. Besides, Mother takes care of everything."

"But you do talk to him?"

The great man's assistant sends letters. "Of course. He contacted me on Visacall the other day. I had to show him how the Rose was blooming."

"But your father will be at the wedding? Invited, I mean. My sister says he and your mother don't get along."

Dear sweet Annis, Adam's sister was as pluto-ee as usual. "Oh, Daddy will be there. It will be extravagant of him, but he insists on seeing my flower in person. It was the present he gave me for my eighteenth birthday." She guided Adam's hand to the flowerlike appendage. "It's wonderful. It even has nerve roots. Every time it's touched, I feel a tingle deep within my body."

"Uh-huh." Adam's fingers barely touched it, then he slipped his hand under her chin. "We're going to have to pick out your engagement ring. Carib's has a unique collection of Venusian black firestones. We could make a selection. . . ."

"No." Disgustedly Lina had a fleeting vision of his mother, the hard-eyed Mrs. Macklin-Davis, with those prune-sized Venusian stones darkly flaming on her skinny, rheumatic fingers. "No. Stones are so lifeless. I want our commitment to be made with something unique."

"A spaceboat — There's a man Earthside who hand-carves the interiors. . . ."

Lord. The resources of these people. Talking about buying a spaceboat as though it were like paying for a ticket to the theater force. "Oh, you are so sweet. But there's something that would mean so much more to me. . . ." Lina gently put her hand on his chest, rubbing slowly. "Oh, but I shouldn't even mention it. . . ."

"Anything, honey. What do you want?"

"Another flower."

He drew back, and his mouth tightened. "You mean another like that thing you have on your shoulder?"

Lina lowered her lashes in feigned embarrassment. "Of course it is awfully expensive — if you can't — I shouldn't have asked. . . ."

"It's not the credits." Adam's face looked round when he frowned. "But it's an illegal operation."

"It's not dangerous at all." Lina moved closer to him, cuddling against his shoulder. "They deliberately keep it illegal to keep the price up. It's the rarity of these flowers that make them so valuable."

"Honey. . . ."

"It doesn't hurt at all. And it would be such a meaningful engagement gift. Much better than a ring. I could never take it off."

"That's why the operation is illegal.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Once those things start growing, they connect with your nervous system. Even if they are surgically removed, they just keep growing back. You have such smooth skin, such lovely coloring . . . why do you need those things?"

"It will be a constant reminder of your love."

Adam looked uncomfortable and unconvinced. She should stop pressing now, but: "Your sister's going to Dr. Ingersol's tomorrow. I had already planned to go as a courage-giver, but my crystal could be chosen at the same time. It would be flowering in time for our engagement announcement. Oh, please, Adam."

"No."

Damn him. With real emotion she started to cry. "You say you love me. Is a flower too permanent for you? Is our marriage to be just another seven-year contractual?"

"Honey, don't cry."

"I love you so much, but if all I'm worth to you is a piddling firestone. . . ."

He sighed and then gave in. "Make the arrangements."

She stopped in mid-sob, not really believing it. "You mean it? Oh, Adam." Lina threw her arms around his neck. She was being lower-strata, but he seemed to enjoy it.

Below them stretched a white expanse of moon surface, pitted with black depths. Lina could feel her flower expanding with the warm joy spreading throughout her body. They were in the Macklin-Davises' private shuttle. It was nicknamed the *Coconut* for its spherical shape and its three huge, two-meter-wide viewing ports.

Beside her, tall, high-boned Annis adjusted the *Coconut's* drive. Lina again noted that Annis's sharp-angled features would have made a man so much handsomer than her brother. But credits did compensate. Wraps daily custom-designed to Annis's mood softened her frame and gave her an aura of dignified stature. But soon those designers would be programming for Lina, and then those High Domers would see dazzling style.

Adam's sister pressed a glowing green square, watching the digits above it descend. The two-meter-circumferenced viewports were set as an inverted pyramid. The large lower window was before their feet. Lina felt sick to see the mooncrust craters jumping up toward them.

"Annis, aren't we too close?"

"We've got to stay below the planet scan. I'm sure Central has been paid off. But if we are intercepted by some imbecile in a patrol craft, it would be awkward to explain why High Dome citizens are maneuvering without clearance to the moon's darker side."

They just scraped above a tall crater, and Lina's body tightened from the tips of her toes to the top of her paling flower.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Annis seemed especially preoccupied today. "Does the operation take long?"

"Procedure, not operation."

"Does it take long?"

She's afraid. So the privileged do squirm. "With some people it takes longer than others."

The moon's white surface ended with an abrupt black curtain of darkness, and the cabin temperature made a chilling drop, despite the instant hissing heat of the climate stabilizers. Yet, as Lina got closer to its source, her Rose seemed to pulse with vitality. In seven minutes of silent running, they glided toward a blackly glittering cluster of survival pods.

With accomplished expertise, Annis maneuvered the shuttle into the Vernex Clinic's landing bay. Most humans lived their dull lives without ever riding in a shuttle, much less a private one. Soon Lina would be taking licensing instruction for this craft.

The thought made the Rose softly engorge with blood. It flushed a deep carmine pink. Dr. Ingersol had told her that with practice, she could learn to control her emotions and actually will the shade of pink she desired.

A tall, square-faced Dr. Ingersol met them at the air lock. He proudly studied his handiwork. "Such a marvelous rosé color, with such lush curved petals."

He looked to Annis. She nodded in polite agreement.

Dr. Ingersol was a heavy man, but in the weak artificial gravity of the laboratory pods, he seemed to bounce ahead of them. At the preparation pod, Annis paused. She looked a bit afraid. Lina squeezed her arm reassuringly. At this moment she pitied Annis; imagine, being afraid of a little discomfort for something as beautiful as one of the flowers. "Doctor, show Annis her crystal."

The doctor bounced into the next bay and brought back an octagonal, transparent case. Inside it, resting on white cotton, was a pale amber-colored crystal.

Its size amazed Lina. It was almost as big as the fingernail on her little finger. Obviously cost was no restriction with Annis Macklin-Davis. Annis's flower would be larger than life.

Lina studied the crystal more closely, and then asked Dr. Ingersol, "It has small red specks. Will the flower be spotted with red?"

"Perhaps. We really can't predict how a crystal will develop until it fully blooms. The colors and shapes are often totally different from the crystalline form. It's the mystery that makes working with them endlessly fascinating."

Annis nervously cut in, "But you use beams. . . ."

"The beams only stimulate the crystal's growth effects on the body's own cells."

She looked so pale. "So the crystal causes the growth?"

Dr. Ingersol firmly corrected her.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"We don't say 'growth.' We call them 'flowers.' Now, Annis, your friend must wait outside. If you will just come into the Preparation Lounge. . . ."

Lina didn't like being referred to merely as a "friend." "Doctor, I had wanted to talk with you."

"Of course, my dear. Just let me get Miss Annis settled. Why don't you wait in my office."

When Dr. Ingersol returned to the office pod, he was his usual charming self. He changed when Lina drifted past the small words. "Doctor, I want another flower."

"But you understood that your Rose could never be removed. . . ."

"Yes. I want two flowers on my shoulder."

"I am very sorry — we don't give more than one. . . ."

"You haven't before, but you could. . . ."

"Theoretically, yes. But no research has been done."

"Can a crystal be implanted today?"

"No — It takes at least an Earth week for the medication I give you to modify your immune system."

"But I have already taken it."

"For the crystal you received. Each dose must be keyed to an individual crystal's particular composition. We would have to restart you . . . but that is irrelevant since we make it a practice not to give more than one to a client."

Lina produced a flat plastic disk and solidly placed it on the desk beside them. Dr. Ingersol's eyes glittered when he recognized the disk's dull platinum finish. By sheer will Lina kept her own hunger out of her voice. "That is on a brightside bank. You know what a platinum credit line stands for?"

"But, my dear, the flowers are works of art. Right now the only known source of the crystals has apparently been mined out. There may never be another deposit located in our system. For one person to have two, it's a bit unfair."

"This flower is to be my engagement present from Adam Macklin-Davis."

She allowed silence to let that bit of enlightenment sink in on Dr. Ingersol's consciousness. Then: "His sister will be finished soon. I would like to make my selection now."

Dr. Ingersol stared at his fingertips for a moment, then shrugged his massive shoulders and walked over to a wall mural that replicated an Earthside medieval garden. He hummed a soft note, and instantly the security wall revealed several trays. He selected three.

Lina waited impatiently as he carried them to her. With childish resentment she noted that the contents of the two trays she had seen previously had diminished considerably.

Now just six crystals rested on the first tray's white velvet. The second tray, which last time held crystals

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

above her price range, had only eight left. Yet now Lina beheld a third tray of larger pieces she hadn't been shown before. Obviously being a near Macklin-Davis opened a few doors.

On the third tray there was one large, irregular-shaped yellow crystal. It was twisted with green veins that reminded her of clusters of wildly growing jungle orchids. She had seen holographs of Dr. Ingersol's flowers that were so much more exotic than her Rose. Lina knew intuitively that this one would be sublime. Even her Rose seemed to long for it. Lina reached out and stroked it with her finger. It felt grainy and wet, and she wanted it.

"Please, Miss Lina, the crystals are quite fragile at times."

Lina drew her hand away. It was too large, too expensive.

She looked back at the other two trays. Quickly Lina rejected all the others in the first tray. The second held slightly larger crystals. When she couldn't afford them, they had been all she longed for; now, compared to the wonders of the third tray, they looked a little unprepossessing. Did Dr. Ingersol always have at least one tray that was just above your price?

In the second tray, Dr. Ingersol pointed to a cloudly white crystal with just a thin touch of red purple stripe around it. "Of course we are often surprised how an individual will develop his or her crystal. Yet one very similar to that one unfolded into a white pentagonal flower with a wavy border of lavender. We called it the 'Snow Petunia' — it would have looked lovely with your Saturn Rose."

Lina had loved that delicate, cloudy opaline crystal when she had seen it on the first visit. It would form a flower larger than her Rose. Possibly one striped. Yet, she hesitated. . . . Once again Lina wistfully looked to the large yellow. Hadn't it been paler before? Had those mysterious greenish dots been there? Would its petals be variegated ribbons of golden transparency on her shoulder?

She could ask Adam for more money . . . but he had been so reluctant in the first place. And if Annis came back and found she was being outstripped by her brother's fiancée?

"I'll take the white one." Her Rose quivered in response. It started a deep, spreading warmth that made her feel so successful, so perfect, so incredibly happy and peaceful.

The doctor didn't immediately remove the crystal from the tray. "You are sure? You will have to sign papers to absolve us from any possible abnormal reaction of your body."

"I did before."

"But no one has two crystals yet."

"I'll be the first."

"You will return afterward and allow us to study the results — for scientific advancement?"

"You have medication for this crystal?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Yes. My assistant will modify it for your body and will have it before you leave. I gather Miss Annis is not to know?"

"It's to be a surprise. Adam wants it that way. I'll be returning with Annis in two weeks for her checkback. I can undergo the procedure then?"

Dr. Ingersol placed her chosen crystal in its own special case. Lina fought a foolish desire to grab it from his hand. Soon.

Lina need not have feared Annis's sharp questioning about her private talk with Dr. Ingersol. As they shuttled back to Lina's home dome, Annis had lost her usual autocratic manner.

"What's the matter?"

"It hurt. . . ."

"Oh, Annis, it will be worth it. You are carrying a budding flower within you. Wait until your crystal blooms, you'll be so proud."

"They are the consciousness-rage now. . . ."

Lina lovingly glanced down at her own rosette. "They will remain objects of beauty long after the rage is over."

Annis looked longingly at Lina's shoulder. "It is lovely on you. But then, anything would be." The tall woman forced a laugh. "But there are so many mean reports. Some of the Fundamentalists claim the crystals are alien creatures sent here by the devil to punish us."

"They are simply inanimate objects that react with our bodies to produce resplendent geometric shapes."

"My shoulder itches."

"It will. Don't scratch. You might scar your birthing flower. Use the ointment they gave you." The tall woman was still so pathetically afraid, Lina touched her arm. "Annis, be joyful, there is beauty growing within you."

Back in the home dome, Vinita wanted an immediate progress report. Lina had expected her mother to be delighted about the engagement. Delight would have been a mild expression of the culmination of Vinita's master strategy, but Lina should have realized her mother did not indulge in premature celebration.

"Did he set the date?"

"Soon, Mother, soon."

Vinita's right hand rubbed the inside of her arm, where in faded blue-green splendor, a magnificent dragon tattoo coiled its way up to her elbow. "What did he say about that thing on your shoulder?"

"He seems to approve of everything about me."

"How you girls can disfigure yourselves with those tumors. . . ."

"*Flowers*. They call them flowers, Mother." Lina looked down at her shoulder. The rosette was pale from her mother's hostility. She stroked its petals gently, infusing them with a shell-like opalescence that also seemed to return her swell of confidence and triumph. Still, this obviously wasn't the time to tell her mother the exact nature of Adam's engagement gift.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Vinita was thinking. "Your grandmother left a modest marriage fund for you in trust. We can stress tradition and simplicity. The Macklin-Davises won't be too happy with that, but they can throw a lavish introduction assembly and postcoitus banquet themselves."

"Couldn't you add to Grandmother's fund?"

"You want more? When I've suffered so by putting off the extend-age process so you could afford to join the High Dome Club? My face was ravaged, so you could meet a boy worthy of you. . . ."

"I'm sure when I'm married, Adam will pay for its restoration."

"It's too late. They can only slow the aging. Not repair all this damage."

Sadly Lina studied the fine, hard lines of age about her mother's eyes and mouth. Yes, the age-extender would have kept them away, yet there were processes that would restore her mother's sculptured beauty. Still, Lina did feel ashamed; her mother had gotten her into the right groups, had tried so hard over the years. Pushed so much. And when Lina had gotten her eighteenth birthday settlement from her father, she had run and squandered the credits on a flower for herself.

Her body cramped with sudden pain. "God's Blood!"

Vinita looked frightened. "What is it?"

The burning, slivering pain took away her breath. Lina had heard stories, that the flowers actually knew when they were loved and knew when they were hated. She softly stroked hers as the pain lessened. "It was just a cramp." And it wasn't the Rose — it was merely a stomach cramp from the stress of the day. Damn Annis for filling her mind with mad, baseless anxieties.

Her mother was already focusing on the next battle of the campaign. "I've done my part. Your father's duty is clear. The Macklin-Davises will be expecting a substantial dower credit from him. Adam, of course, will allow you to keep it, but the gesture must be made. Everyone will expect it."

"If Daddy can afford it, he will."

"Your father can afford it — whether he will or not is in question. He'll be hearing from me if he doesn't." Vinita studied her daughter critically. "You'll need new wraps for the receptions. And since you have that thing, they'll have to be designed off the left shoulder."

"Yes."

"We'll view some this evening." Vinita's voice softened. "Has Adam asked you what you wanted for your engagement token?"

"He mentioned Venusian firestones."

"From Carib's, no doubt." Vinita gave in to a rare impulse and hugged her daughter. "Oh, baby, I am so proud of you!"

Lina winced as her flower was

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

squeezed in her mother's embrace.

By the end of the second week, Annis's flower has blossomed into a thing of rare perfection. Six long, delicately tapering petals now spread across her shouder. Tiny red tendrils spiraled from the center, outward on the bright orange star. Lina had to force herself not to stare at Annis's shoulder during the long shuttle hop to the Vernex Clinic.

There Dr. Ingersol made much of Annis Macklin-Davis. He had all his staff turn out to admire her flower. "There's never been one like it before. We'll call it the 'Tiger Lily.'"

Annis blushed, and the tendrils on her flower curled with joy. Lina realized how plain Annis really looked — not at all the proper setting for such a wildly beautiful flower.

While Annis took her Introduction Classes, Lina was given a mild sedative. Soon she lay on a cream-colored, contoured couch in the center of a rounded pod. Dr. Ingersol himself supervised the selection of the site. "We want to get a proper balance with the Saturn Rose. This white should be larger. We will place it higher, farther away from the neck."

The operating pod smelled pleasantly of vanilla, but the couch was cold and the sheet wrapped about her helped little. A yellow masked technician sprayed her shoulder. Another doctor cut her with a light wand and then implanted the crystal. Dr. Ingersol stayed to observe, talking to his assistants.

"Caddy, is there any response from the rosette?"

"Color's rather greenish. Temperature is low. But that may be due to the immunization stabilizers we have been giving Lina."

Finally Ingersol was standing over Lina, looking down with a little frown. "We can still remove it before stimulation. Are you absolutely sure?"

The fool! "Begin."

The technician wheeled her into the hub dome of the operating pods. There Lina was positioned under a tremendous comet-shaped mechanism. The cometlike tail rose twenty meters to the dome, and sprouted out a tangled system of cables. The doctor positioned the head's nose point right above the stain-marked skin seal. There was a hum, a slight vibration of the cold couch, and Lina found herself unable to move.

Even numbed, she felt a bitter coldness penetrating her shoulder and body — ten times worse than before. her Rose shriveled with the pain. She wanted to scream. Then relief as it was over. Dr. Ingersol escorted her to the shuttle. He seemed deep in creative thought, "Two flowers on your shoulder. We shall call it a 'corsage.'"

After the fourth Earth day, the itching started. Five small bumps appeared on her shoulder above the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Rose, a little more to the left. Lina restrained herself from scratching and had to wear a scarf to conceal her condition from her mother. She also had to adjust the food program to maximize her caloric and vitamin intake, especially the B's.

By the appointed time of the Macklin-Davises' dinner for her mother and herself, Lina's engagement flower had fully blossomed into five uniform, broad petals, slightly smaller than the Saturn Rose. Normally the flat petals of her second flower were white with a powder-blue center that easily deepened to violet. As the center color richened, the petals' edges developed wavy, purplish rims. It was beautiful, but since the second crystal had been larger than the Rose's, Lina was disappointed that its flower was so small and plain.

Quick to sense a pressure point, Annis exquisitely pointed out, "It's like a little pansy. Very sweet. It suits you, Lina."

Lina smiled politely as she noted that Annis wore a two-shouldered dress, with only a wide breast cut that crowded her flower, rather than displayed it.

Mrs. Macklin-Davis was being very friendly with Vinita. "What are young girls coming to these days? They chose those growing bumps instead of firestones."

Vinita just smiled and agreed with everything Mrs. Macklin-Davis said.

Lina stroked her flowers — what peaceful supremacy they gave her. She touched them often, and they glowed with a rich velvet red and royal purple. Dr. Ingersol's Introduction Classes had said there might be a slight change of color the first year, but Annis's Tiger Lily had paled and drooped terribly. Lina decided it now looked more like a drowned dump cat because the Lily wasn't getting any attention. During dinner the Lily must have twitched as Lina's Rose had at first. Lina saw Annis unconsciously raise her hand to the flower, start to touch her Lily, then pull her fingers away. The idiot. She's afraid to touch herself. Afraid of any emotion, even if it is pleasurable.

After the dip feast, they discussed the wedding plans. Adam was no help and Vinita seemed more subdued than normal, but Lina felt her flowers swell and crimson with pride. They were planning her wedding at the Crystal Cathedral Dome.

Mrs. Macklin-Davis even hesitated when an obviously irritating subject was brought up. "Your wedding wrap . . . your shoulder will be veiled. After all, those operations are illegal and there will be the tape-persons covering my son's wedding."

"No. My wrap is being designed to feature my love corsage."

The old witch just cursed her with cold eyes; it was Annis who scored the rootblast: "There will be many with flowers, Mother. And Lina won't even be the only one with two.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The Kandlist girl has twin hydrangea blooms, in white and green."

Mrs. Macklin-Davis smiled conspiratorially to Vinita. "Nouveau creditpersons."

The silver evening tarnished considerably for Lina. She and her mother shuttled back to the home dome in silence, but when Adam was on his way, Vinita started in again. "Thank the Solar they never once mentioned your father's wedding gift. You must call him next slack period and demand he send it immediately."

But Lina's father had already come through. No, he would not be able to attend her wedding, but he had messengered two whole credit disks. Disks that Adam said he didn't want. Disks that were hers now. Disks that were platinum.

Adam shuttled Lina to the Vernex Clinic for her checkback. He stayed in the waiting area while Lina faced Dr. Ingersol.

"They are beautiful, my dear. Perfect." Dr. Ingersol's smooth fingers prickled the surface of the Rose.

It was so much more sensitive lately. "My Rose is almost as sore as the new one."

"It's jealous of its sibling. They will take a while to quiet down. Two females on one shoulder have to settle in."

"Females? Are the crystals — do they mate, I mean . . .?"

"Mate? Like us? No. 'Females' is just a figure of expression I choose to use." He reached out and stroked the tip of her "Royal Petunia" with his index finger. It swelled happily, but Lina also got a thin, searing pain deep within her body. He should have stroked both of the flowers. But Dr. Ingersol was still talking. "Some of the flowers have a delicate beauty about them that seems feminine in nature. Others — like your friend Annis's bright, bold Tiger Lily — seem masculine. How is she doing?"

"I understand that Selina Kandlist has two hydrangea blossoms?"

"Yes. Your corsage idea seems to have caught on. We will be implanting two crystals for a Tarus man today."

"I want another—"

Dr. Ingersol stared at her, saying nothing. Lina met his eyes and defiantly stared back. She was stronger than the doctor, and basically it was the credits that he was interested in. Lina drew the two platinum disks out from her sporran. "I want the large golden crystal — the one I touched last time. You still have it?"

'Yes, but. . . ."

"The Macklin-Davises could set in motion any investigation they wished. Central couldn't ignore your operations if my fiancé created official interest."

He studied her, then the pod about them. Finally he said, "Three. We could call them your 'Flower Garden.'"

• • •

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

That next trip to the clinic was a problem. Adam refused to shuttle her. And he intimated that his sister wasn't seeing anyone, because Annis was having second thoughts about having permanently disfigured herself.

Lina did arrange a ride with another High Domer, but even getting out of the home dome was a problem, when Vinita cut her off with a shrill voice. "Your father's secretary says you have recieved your dower portion."

"Did she? Isn't it you who always says father lies about transmitting the support credits?"

"Has Adam asked for the dower yet?"

"He's a High Domer, Mother. There is no reason for him to missile for the credits."

"Adam hasn't been around lately."

"Soon we'll be living together."

"Don't lose him."

"I won't."

Vinita stood there, then the anger drained from her face to be replaced by an aged, pathetic look that Lina found worse than her anger. "If he doesn't ask for the credits. . . . Baby, you've lived with me a long time. I've given you the best; it wouldn't be bad if you were to help out your mother."

"Of course. And I will." She hugged Vinita. "Soon I'll be Mrs. Macklin-Davis."

Vinita's anger flashed through. "If you don't twist everything bottomside. Your father was always twisting up!"

The insertion of the third crystal caused less discomfort then the second, but her mother quickly noted the five budding bumps on Lina's shoulder with ill-concealed anger. Lina just ignored her.

Adam was more of a problem, but Lina could reach him. "Please touch them, Adam, it feels so good when you do. Only you." He shuttled her to Vernex for her checkback.

Dr. Ingersol studied her closely, talking his notes. "The flowers form an obtuse triangle on Lina's shoulder, to the left of her breasts. High at thirty degrees is the Royal Petunia; closer to her breast at sixty degrees is the Saturn Rose; and at ten degrees there are five large, diamond-shaped petal-tendrils, their coloration a vibrant, variegated yellow. The newest flower is marked with light green spots; the coloring appears iridescent. This third flower seems not to be fully developed at this time."

Pride filled Lina. She had known intuitively that this one large crystal would be an extravagantly flourishing masterpiece. "You will call it the 'Sun orchid.'"

Dr. Ingersol didn't answer. "Have you experienced any extraordinary itching?"

"No, just the usual."

He smiled reassuringly and summoned his assistants in to look at Lina. Dr. Ingersol was praising, yet his voice sounded unaccustomedly subdued. "Very large. Well formed with

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

slight curling. Samel, note that the gray-green markings have almost a velvety texture."

"Yes, Doctor. Velvet, formed by minute tendrils."

"Caddy, get holiprints and sonagraphs."

Lina had learned to reach up and spread her fingers so that all the flowers got a swirl of touch. They responded with peaceful happiness.

The really bad itching started when she got back to the home dome. Determinedly, Lina resisted scratching her orchid, but she found herself clawing at her arm and thighs. Her left breast had a line of growing beads, then one started down her knee, another on her back.

Horrified, Vinita took her to a holipractitioner, a surgeon, and an allergist. Those doctors weren't any help. They gave her soothing ointments for the itching, but they all clearly disapproved of the flowers and suggested she go back to see the people who had given them to her.

Adam didn't return her first five messages. The beaded areas on her legs were sprouting gray-green mosslike projections when Lina managed to corner Adam at the High Dome Club. He couldn't stand her tears, and finally she sat beside him in the *Coconut*, headed for Vernex.

"God, it's on your arm, too."

And her cheek was itching. "It's an allergic reaction."

"Is that what the doctor said?"

"Dr. Ingersol will confirm it. This may have nothing to do with the flowers, it may just be an incompatibility with the immune-suppression serum. Dr. Ingersol will probably give me something to counteract it." But the doctor hadn't returned her urgent requests for a Visacall.

"He's got a treatment for this?"

"I haven't been able to speak with Dr. Ingersol."

"Lina — you should be speaking with someone else. A surgeon, to see if that gray stuff can be removed. . . ."

She had spoken to several surgeons. Her mother was still under sedation. "Can't you go any faster?"

"Lina . . . uh, well, the wedding is so close."

"Yes."

"It looks like your cheek might be breaking out."

"Yes."

"Maybe we should postpone the wedding . . . until you are better."

"Of course." Until the twelfth of never.

They shuttled in silence after that. And when they landed in Vernex's bay, Adam exhibited no supportive desire to come with her to Dr. Ingersol's office. Lina grimly noted that this was the first time Dr. Ingersol had been unavailable to meet an arriving client when a technician led her to one of the preparation lounges.

She was furious. She was scared. But before they would allow her to see Dr. Ingersol, a slew of doctors

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and technicians probed and graphed and taped her entire body.

Finally she was allowed in the great man's office, and shown a seat. Dr. Ingersol was there, closly studying his wallscreen views of her flowers and the budding green bumps on various sections of her body.

"Yes. That is magnificent."

"What?"

"Your Orchid. It unfolded with a grace and hue finer than any of us could have predicted."

She tightened her entwined fingers until the pain brought her control. "But the itching, the bumps, and these terrible green growths?"

"Have nothing to do with your flower."

"Then it wasn't the crystal?"

He looked very uncomfortable. "Well, actually. You see, my dear, it is more like you were given two crystals."

Two for the price of one? Is the bastard going to try and charge me more credits?

Dr. Ingersol was studying a screen of her budding buttocks while he talked to her. "Yes. The crystal that formed your orchid also held a separate set of genes-reforming material. There have been two other cases recorded. They were noted in the appendix of those hold-harmless forms you signed."

"If they are two different crystals, you can save the flower — and get rid of this ghastly spreading stuff."

"Oh, your flowers are forever. They can't be affected."

Her throat was dry; she didn't want to ask, she couldn't ask, but he was just standing there. "And these things growing all over me — are they forever, too?"

He looked down at his hands. "I'm afraid so. At this time, there is nothing we can do without destroying your nervous system."

She held out her right arm with its line of gray moss. "You mean these are flowers, too?"

"Oh, no. No. We don't call them flowers." Dr. Ingersol shook his head. "Actually, we call them weeds."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

In which Professor Duckworth and his friends figure out a method to demonstrate to a scientist what he really *looks like at work, with stunning results. . .*

Me and My Shadow

BY
LARRY EISENBERG

I was having lunch with Duckworth one afternoon at the exclusive Faculty Club, when Dr. Dominic Foglio hobbled in, his fine Neapolitan features drawn in somber lines. He moved painfully to the steam table and began indicating items of food in a disinterested way.

"Dom is a great scientist," said Duckworth, leaning toward me confidentially. "He's also one of the university's outstanding manic-depressives. When in a manic phase, he's capable of solving the knottiest of problems. But when depressed, he can make winning a Nobel Prize seem like a total disaster."

"I believe he's heading our way," I said, sotto voce.

And he was.

"Could you gentlemen bear the company of an aging underachiever?" asked Dominic, slipping his tray into an empty place at our table and gingerly lowering his rump to the seat.

He winced as he reached wood.

"Cheer up, Dom," said Duckworth. "The world isn't coming to an end, yet."

"I wouldn't bet my coccyx on that probability," said Dominic. "My hemorrhoids are playing Merry Ned with my pain receptors so that even a Nuclear Winter seems like the easy way out. And if you couple that with two years of failed experiments, you can understand why I look at smiling faces with utter loathing."

I quickly doused my smile and tried to look grim.

Duckworth made no attempt to suppress his grin, but continued to down his veal parmigiana with gusto, despite what an incompetent chef had done to good veal.

"If only I had some inkling as to

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

why I've gotten nowhere," said Dominic. "My embryonic cells seem to be perfectly in order. And my patch clamp amplifier is working to perfection. Maybe it's the glass in my electrodes?"

"You hear conflicting stories about electrodes, " I said.

"Ah, to hell with it," said Dominic. "It's all mumbo jumbo anyway. Sometimes I think I should have become a witch doctor in some godforsaken jungle."

Later, Duckworth elaborated on Dominic's experiments.

"He's examining the selectively conducting channels of these embryonic cells with the notion of later adding antibiotics to the preparation to see what happens to the cell conductivity. If he finds what he's looking for, it might give us the answer to how antibiotics work at a cellular level."

"Nobel Prize stuff?"

"Could very well be," said Duckworth.

Since Duckworth had earned two Nobel awards of his own, I assumed he knew whereof he spoke.

"Have you any idea why he doesn't succeed?"

"Sort of," said Duckworth. "He has the brilliance, the intuition. But he sometimes gets mired over the interpretation of a particular piece of data, so that he loses sight of the overall problem."

"Losing the forest for the trees?" I ventured.

"A hoary cliché, but apt in this one instance." said Duckworth.

I pondered the situation for a few moments. Then I came to a decision.

"I think I see a possible way out for Dominic," I said.

Our new university president, successor to the ebullient, dictatorial, and now involuntarily retired President Hinkle, was himself a Nobel laureate named Ishmael Weatherwax. A tubby little man with chin whiskers resembling those of the Toonerville Trolley motorman, he threw his not inconsiderable weight about with great abandon.

Although he refused to make faculty promotions from within the ranks, he set about bringing in Nobel laureates from all parts of the world on the premise that a bird in the present is worth two in the future. Despite the fact that President Weatherwax seemed to suffer from a malignant ego that Duckworth thought might require a radical egoectomy, he did accomplish one thing that won my total approval.

Merriweather University owed its new Artificial Intelligence Laboratory to Ishmael Weatherwax. In my role as head of our Electronic and Microcomputer Laboratory, I became deeply involved in designing the electronic systems required by the AI Lab. But it was a subsection of that lab that drew

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

my deepest interest, the Simulation Center.

Dr. Emil Venner, who was the director of the Simulation Center, had given me a mini-lecture on what it was all about.

"Everything is derived from the psychoanalytic models that I developed. My enemies call me a neo-Freudian who bases his work on Freud's developmental theories. And I freely admit that they are right.

"Using a special questionnaire that I designed, we work out a full reactive profile on any man or woman. Some people jokingly call it a 'personality' profile. Come over to this railing and I'll demonstrate a little of what I mean."

Dr. Venner inserted a hard disk into a drive port and then set the controls on a large panel.

"I shall now turn on the three-dimensional projector," he said. "Just look down there."

A neatly furnished apartment suddenly came to life. A tall man, with deep wrinkles in his cheeks, was talking to a slim, rather attractive woman. She was sitting on an ottoman, combing her hair. Her features were of almost classical purity, although her pallid skin showed evidence of limited contact with the sun.

The man was pacing back and forth with a sense of suppressed violence.

"So you're prepared to go ahead with it?" he asked harshly.

The woman nodded, saying nothing in reply and continuing to comb her hair.

"I want that child," he said doggedly.

The woman interrupted her even stroking and looked at him bleakly.

"Suppose you *have the baby, then," she said. Her voice was hard as steel.*

"Confound it," said Dr. Venner suddenly. That's not what she said to him before."

He pressed a button and the scene vanished.

"What have I been watching?" I asked.

"You've been observing the projections of two real people. The man is a patient of mine. I've never actually met the woman. She's a friend of my patient and, as you've probably guessed, is in the early stages of an unwanted pregnancy. That is to say, unwanted by *her*. I constructed her reactive model from what he told me."

"Which makes her model pure speculation, doesn't it?"

"Absolutely," said Dr. Venner. "But my real interest is in how my patient conceives of her, not the actual woman. We know how to store every detail of each patient's reactive profile or personality model in the computer memory, including all physical attributes as well."

"Including the quality of their voices?"

"The quality of their voices is very

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

important," said Venner.

"And then?"

"Then we put the two individuals into a provocative situation. In this particular case, the situation is an argument over whether or not an abortion should be performed."

"But," I said, "based on your patient's perception, this child will never be born. What if his visualization of the woman is wrong?"

"The child *was* born and is now two years old," said Venner wryly. "Clearly my patient's idea of what this woman is like does not agree with reality. I have to determine why this disparity exists. Is it my patient, my model? I plan to alter the profile of the woman to see if her actions will then accord better with reality."

"Have you ever been successful at something like this?" I asked.

"Several times," said Dr. Venner. "Slowly but surely we're arriving at a topographical model of the human nervous system that is uncannily accurate. Our predicted behavior patterns are occasionally even identical to those of reality."

"What mechanism projects the figures?"

"It's a computer-generated reconstruction that holographically gives the three-dimensional projection. Moreover, our 'people' have a spatial sense, too. And they can 'feel' one another by touch. It's all part of the computerized model."

"Forgive me for a layman's comment," I said, "but to me these figures seemed terribly real. And I had the chilling thought that *we* might be holographically projected figures watched by observers of yet another dimension."

"Stuff and nonsense," said Dr. Venner. "You've been reading too many science fiction stories."

I had felt properly chastised by Dr. Venner, but it didn't keep me from seeing a possibility of using his approach to solve the impasse of Dr. Dominic Foglio. Of necessity, it would require two approvals: first from Dr. Venner, and second, and probably much more difficult, from Dom Foglio.

When I outlined my idea to Venner, he was immediately intrigued.

"It would involve the whole concept of Scientific Creativity," he said enthusiastically. "I should be delighted to try it with such a distinguished guest as Dr. Foglio. Do you think there's a chance of his agreeing?"

"I don't know," I said. "But 50 percent of the battle is over. Let me see how Dr. Foglio responds to the idea."

I decided to slide obliquely into the issue. Duckworth agreed to help me.

"Dom," I said one day as he joined Duckworth and me at our lunch table, "what do you think of Dr. Venner's Simulation Center?"

"That psychoanalytic claptrap? Not

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

much. I'd place it just one notch above numerology."

"I don't know," said Duckworth. "Some people seem to think it has a lot of scientific merit."

"Do you?" asked Dom.

"No," said Duckworth. "But I don't rank it with numerology. I see it more along the lines of voodoo."

"I can't believe this!" I cried. "Neither of you has ever visited the Simulation Center. And yet you carry on as though you knew what was going on there. I *have* visited the center and talked extensively with Venner. I've seen the projection and simulation systems in operation, and I think they may have a lot of scientific merit."

"Well, bully for you, then," said Duckworth.

"In all honesty," added Dom Foglio, "I don't really know much about the Simulation Center. I can't say that I care, either."

I felt terribly frustrated by this stonewalling of what I was trying to do.

"All right," I said angrily. "Have fun. I'll just pick up my tray and eat elsewhere."

"Wait a minute," said Dom. "Don't take it personally. We're just naturally skeptical of anything that isn't hard science."

"If you want to know," I said petulantly, "I had an idea that it might benefit *you*."

"Benefit me? How?"

"Have you ever considered how valuable it would be to see yourself at work? To view your method of functioning? To be able objectively to evaluate your way of thinking, of setting up an experiment?"

"I could do that with a movie camera," said Dom.

"Movie camera," I said derisively. "The simulation system will take a model of you, with your personality, and place it in a laboratory setting identical to your own. By varying the model of your personality slightly, one can see if your experimental progress is aided or hindered. There are a million and one possibilities here," I cried, warming up to the subject. "Why not be open-minded and truly scientific about this issue? Why don't you go to see Venner and let him devise a personality profile of you? He's really gung ho about the idea."

"I think you better do it," said Duckworth drily. "Otherwise he'll continue to take it personally."

"I don't know," said Dom. "I still don't cotton to the idea."

"Do it," said Duckworth softly. "For us."

And when Dom finally nodded his reluctant agreement, Duckworth winked at me from behind Dom's chair.

Despite his reluctance, Dom Foglio was cooperative in responding to the Venner questionnaire. I observed a twinkle in his eye and a suppressed chuckle in his rejoinders, but

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

all that vanished the first time he saw himself at work in his own laboratory. I could swear that he, an avowed atheist, furtively crossed himself when the image appeared and began to advance the micropipette into the preparation.

"I don't believe this," he said. "There are spikes showing on the oscilloscope in the projection."

"Naturally," said Dr. Venner. "Our programmer has put every aspect of your experiment, as described by you, into the situation."

Day after day, Foglio went to the Simulation Laboratory and observed the progress of what he called his "Shadow". Afterward he and Dr. Venner would discuss how they might modify the personality model to produce changes in an indicated direction.

"Well," said Duckworth one day, as Dom eased himself into his lunchtime seat. "How's it going?"

"Not badly," said Dom. "I think I'm beginning to see what was wrong with my *modus operandi*."

"Do you want to talk about it?" I asked.

"Not just yet," said Dom. "Let's just say that I'm beginning to see the light at the end of the tunnel."

But a week later, Dom was plunged into the deepest gloom I had ever seen.

"What happened?" I asked in as soothing a voice as I could muster.

He started to answer, choked up, waved his hands inarticulately, and walked away.

At that moment, Duckworth arrived and looked after the retreating figure. His tongue clucked sympathetically.

"Do you know what happened?" I asked.

"I do. It's all your fault. You're a born meddler. And this time you meddled once too often."

"For God's sake!" I cried. "What happened?"

Duckworth sighed.

"Dom's Shadow solved the problem he's been chasing all these years. While Dom was in the process of deciding what he had been doing wrong, his modified personality model actually went ahead and did the necessary things."

I began to jump up and down.

"Doesn't this mean that Dom may have a lock on the Nobel award? After all, his shadow is really a version of Dom Foglio."

"So say you. But Dom thinks otherwise. Look at the poor soul!"

Sure enough, Dom was coming back in our direction, hobbling painfully.

"I want to apologize for my antisocial behavior," said Dom. "I was just too depressed to talk to you. Can you picture the bitterness of this situation? A goddamned computer model, a holographic projection that's

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

insubstantial, solves a problem that a flesh-and-blood idiot, namely myself, was unable to solve in ten years! And to think that I've been calling myself a scientist!"

"You're looking at it from entirely the wrong perspective," said Duckworth.

But despite all the arguments we could muster, Dom was adamant. He refused to write up the results discovered by his Shadow, and swore that if we persisted in raising the issue, he would never speak to us.

Nevertheless, two months later, Dr. Venner published the details of his experiment in a brilliant paper that included a complete write-up of Foglio's experiment, written by Dom Foglio's Shadow.

The Nobel judges must have had a merry time tussling with this situation. In the following year, the paper within a paper (as the press called it) earned Dr. Dominic Foglio the Nobel Award for Medicine. Dom refused to go to Stockholm or to even write an acceptance speech. Ultimately, the speech composed by his Shadow was read at the ceremonies in Stockholm.

At first, Dom would not cash the substantial check that went with the award. But Duckworth ultimately convinced him to donate half of it to the Simulation Center, and half to the university's Scholarship Fund.

As for me? I've meddled my last meddle.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Here is another of Marion Zimmer Bradley's entertaining tales of the young magician Lythande, who is also a minstrel and, in this story, is under the spell of an enchanted lute.

The Wandering Lute

BY
MARION ZIMMER BRADLEY

On the glass bowl the salamander hissed blue fire. Lythande bent over the bowl, extending numbed white fingers, for the morning chill at Ithkar nipped nose and fingers. At a warning hiss from the bowl, the magician stepped back, looking questioningly at the young candlemaker.

"Does he bite?"

Her name is Alnath," Eirthe said. "She usually doesn't need to."

"Allow me to beg her pardon," Lythande said. "Essence of Fire, may I borrow your warmth?"

Fire streamed upward; Lythande bent gratefully over the bowl; Alnath coiled within it, like a miniature dragon, flames streaming upward from the fire-elemental's substance.

"She likes you," said Eirthe. "When Prince Tashgan came here, she hissed at him and the silk covering of his lute began to smolder; he went out faster than he came in."

The hood of the mage-robe was thrown back, and by the light of the fire streaming upward, the Blue Star could be clearly seen on Lythande's high, narrow forehead.

"Tashgan? I know him only by reputation," the minstrel-magician said. "Will you enjoy living in a palace, Eirthe? Will Her Brilliance adapt kindly to a bowl of jewels and diamonds?"

Eirthe giggled, for Prince Tashgan was known throughout Ithkar as a womanizer. "As a matter of fact, he was looking for *you*, Lythande. How do *you* feel about life in a palace?"

"For me? What need could the prince have of a mercenary-musician?"

"Perhaps," Eirthe said,"he wishes to take music lessons." She nodded at the lute slung across the magician's

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

shoulder. "I have heard Tashgan play at three winter-festivals, and he plays not half so well as you. The lute is not his best instrument." She giggled, with a suggestive roll of her eyes.

Lythande enjoyed a raunchy joke as well as anyone; the magician's mellow chuckle filled the room. "It is frequently so with those who take up the lute for pleasure, not to earn their bread. As for those who wear a crown, who can tell them their playing could be bettered, whatever the instrument? Flattery ruins much talent."

"Tashgan wears no crown, nor ever will, " Eirthe said. "The High Lord of Tschardain had three sons—know you not the story?"

"Is he the third son of Tschardain? I heard he was in exile," Lythande said, "but I have only passed briefly through Tschardain."

"The old king had a stroke, seven years ago; while he lingered, paralyzed and unable to speak, his oldest son assumed the power; his second son became his brother's adviser and marshal of his armies. Tashgan was, they said, weak, absentminded, and a womanizer; I daresay it was only that the young lord wanted few claimants to challenge his position."

She bent to rummage briefly under her worktable and pulled out a silk-wrapped bundle. "Here are the candles you ordered. Remember that they're spelled not to burn unless they're in one of Cadmon's glasses—though you can probably find a counterspell easily enough."

"One of Cadmon's glasses I have already." Lythande took the candles, but lingered, close to the salamander's heat. Eirthe glanced at the lute on an embroidered leather band across Lythande's shoulder.

She asked, "Were you magician first or minstrel? It seems a strange combination."

"I was musician from childhood," Lythande said, "and when I took up magic, I deserted my first love. But the lute is a forgiving mistress." The magician bestowed the packet of candles in one of the concealed pockets in the dark mage-robe, bowed in courtly fashion to Eirthe, and murmured to the salamander:

"Essence of Fire, my thanks for your warmth."

A streamer of cobalt fire surged upward out of the bowl, leaped to Lythande's outstretched hand. Lythande did not flinch as the salamander perched for a moment on the slender wrist, though it left a red mark. Eirthe whistled faintly in surprise.

"She *never* does that to strangers!" The girl glanced at the callus on her own wrist where the salamander habitually rested.

"She is like a were-dragon made small in appearance." Hearing that, Alnath hissed again, stretching out her long, fiery neck, and as Eirthe watched in astonishment, Lythande stroked the flaming scales. "Perhaps

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

she knows we are kindred spirits; she is not the first fire-elemental I have known," said the magician. "A good part of the business of an Adept is playing with fire. There, fair Essence of the purest of all Elements, go to your true mistress." Lythande raised an arm in a graceful gesture; streamers of fire seared the air as Alnath flashed toward Eirthe's wrist and came to rest there. "Should Tashgan seek me again, tell him I lodge at the Blue Dragon."

But Lythande saw Prince Tashgan before Eirthe did.

The Adept was seated in the common room of the Blue Dragon, a pot of ale untouched on the table — for one of the many vows fencing the powers of an Adept of the Blue Star was that they might never be seen to eat or drink before strangers. Nevertheless, the pot of ale was the magician's unquestioned passport to sit among the townsfolk and listen to whatever might be happening among them.

"Will you favor us with a song, High-born?" asked the innkeeper. The Pilgrim Adept uncovered the lute and began to play a ballad of the countryside. As the soft notes stole into the room, the drinkers fell silent, listening to the mellow sound of Lythande's voice, soft, neutral, and sexless.

As the last note died away, a tall, richly clad man, standing at the back of the room, came forward.

"Master Minstrel, I salute you," he said. "I had heard from afar of your skill with the lute and came here a little before my proper season to hear you play and — other things. You lodge here? Might I buy you a drink in privacy, Magician? I have heard that your services are for hire; I have need of them."

"I am a mercenary-magician," Lythande said. "I give no instruction on the lute."

"Nevertheless, let us discuss in private whether it would be worth your while to give me lessons," said the man. "I am Tashgan, son of Idriash of Tschardain."

Some of the watchers in the room had the uneasy sense that the Blue Star on Lythande's brow shrugged itself and focused to look at Tashgan. Lythande said, "So be it; before the Final Battle of Law and Chaos, many unusual things may come to pass, and for all I know, this may well be one of them."

"Will it please you to speak in your chamber, or in mine?"

"Let it be in yours," said Lythande. The items with which any person chose to surround himself could often give the magician an important clue to character; if this prince was to be a client — for the services of magician or of minstrel — such clues might prove valuable.

Tashgan had commanded the most luxurious chamber at the Blue Dragon; its original character had almost been obscured by silken hangings and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

cushions. Elegant small musical instruments — a tambour adorned with silk ribbons, a *borain,* a pair of serpent-rattles, and a gilded sistrum — hung on the wall. As the door opened, a slight girl in a chemise, arms bare and hair loosened and falling in a disheveled cloud over her bared young breasts, rolled from the bed and scurried away behind the hangings. Lythande's face drew together in a frown of distaste.

"Charming, is she not?" asked Tashgan negligently. "A local maiden; I want no permanent ties in this town. Indeed, it is of ties of this sort — undesired ties, and involuntary — that I would speak. Lissini, bring wine from my private stock."

The girl poured wine; Lythande formally lifted the cup — without, however, tasting it — and bowed to Tashgan.

"How may I serve Your Excellency?"

"It is a long story." Tashgan unfastened the strap of the lute across his shoulder. "What think you of this lute?" His weak, watery blue eyes followed the instrument as he undid the case and displayed it.

Lythande studied the instrument briefly; smaller than Lythande's own lute, exquisitely crafted of fruitwood inlaid with mother-of-pearl.

"I remember not one so fairly crafted since I came into this country."

"Appearances are deceiving," said Tashgan. "This instrument, magician, is at once my curse and my blessing."

"May I?" Lythande put forth a slender hand and touched the delicately fretted neck. The Blue Star blazed suddenly, and Lythande frowned.

"This lute is under enchantment. This is the long story of which you spoke. The night is young; long live the night. Tell on."

Tashgan signaled to the girl to pour more of the fragrant wine. "Know you what it is to be a third son in a royal line, magician?"

Lythande only smiled enigmatically. Royal birth in a faraway country was a claim made by many rogues and wandering magicians; Lythande had never made such a claim. "It is your story, Highness."

"A second son ensures the succession and may serve as counselor to the first, but after my elder brothers were safely past childhood ailments, my royal parents knew not what to do with this inconvenient third prince. Had I been a daughter, they could have schooled me for a good marriage, but a third son? Only a possible pretender for factions or a rebel against his brethren. So they cast about to give my life some semblance of purpose; and so had me instructed in music."

"There are worse fates," murmured Lythande. "In many lands a minstrel holds honor higher than a prince."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"It is not so in Tschardain." Tashgan gestured for more wine. Lythande lifted the glass and inhaled the delicate bouquet of the wine, without, however, touching or tasting it.

Tashgan went on:

"It is not so in Tschardain; therefore I came to Ithkar, where a minstrel has his own honor. For many years my life has assumed its regular character; guested in the spring on the borders of Tschardain, then northward into Ithkar for fair-time, and northerly through the summer, to Northwander. Then at the summer's height, I turn southward again, through Ithkar, retracing my steps, guested and welcomed as a minstrel in castle and manor and at last, for Yule-feast, to Tschardain. There I am welcomed for a hand-span of days by father and brothers. So it has been for twelve years, since I was only a little lad; it changed nothing when my father the High Lord was laid low by a stroke and my brother Rasthan assumed his powers. It seemed that it would go on for a lifetime, till I grew too old to threaten my brother's throne or the throne of his sons."

"It sounds not too ill a life," Lythande observed neutrally.

"Not so indeed," said Tashgan, with a lascivious roll of his eyes. "Here in Ithkar a musician is highly favored, as indeed you did say, and when I am guested in castle and manor — well, I suppose the ladies tire of queendom, and a musician who can give them lessons on his instrument— "Another suggestive wink and roll of his eyes. "Well, master magician and minstrel, you, too, bear a lute. I daresay you, too, could tell tales, if you would, of how women give hospitality to a minstrel."

The Blue Star on Lythande's brow furrowed again with hidden distaste; the magician said only, "Is there, then, some reason why it cannot go on as you willed it?"

"Say rather as my father and my brother Rasthan willed it," said Tashgan. "They took no chances that I would choose to stay more than my appointed hand of days every year in Tschardain. My father's court magician made for me this lute, and set it about with enchantments, so that my wanderings with the lute would bring me never, for instance, into the country of any noble who might be plotting against Tschardain's throne, or allow me to linger long enough anywhere to make alliances. Day by day, my rounds are as duly set as the rising of sun and moon or the procession of solstice following equinox and back again to solstice; a week here, ten days there, three days in this place and a fortnight in that. . . . I cannot tarry in any place beyond my allotted span, for the compulsion in the lute sets me to wandering again."

"And so for many years it was not unwelcome," said Tashgan. "Among

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

other things — well, it freed me from fear that any of those women —" yet once more the suggestive roll of the watery eyes — "would entrap me for more than a little . . . dalliance. But three moons ago a messenger from Tschardain reached me. A were-dragon came from the south, and both my brothers perished in his flame. So that I, with no training or inclination to rule, am suddenly the High Lord's only heir — and my father may die at any moment, or linger for another hand of years as a paralyzed figurehead. My father's vizier has bidden me return at once to Tschardain and claim my heritage."

Tashgan slammed his hand with rage on the table, making the lute rattle and the ribbons tremble. "And I cannot! The enchantment of this accursed lute compels me northward, even to Northwander! And if I set out southward to my kingdom, I am racked with queasiness and pain, I can stomach neither food nor wine, nor can I even look on a woman with pleasure till I have set off in the appointed direction for the time of year. I can go nowhere save upon my appointed rounds, for this damnable enchanted lute compels me!"

Lythande's tall, narrow body shook with laughter, and Tashgan's ill-natured scowl fixed itself upon the Adept.

"You laugh at my curse, magician?"

"Everything under the sun has a funny side," Lythande said, and struggled to control unseemly laughter. "Bethink yourself, my prince; had this happened to another, would you not find it funny?"

Tashgan's eyes narrowed to slits, but finally he grinned weakly and said, "I fear so. But if it were your predicament, magician, would you laugh?"

Lythande laughed again. "I fear not, Highness. And that says much about what folk call amusement. So now tell me; how can I serve you?"

"Is it not obvious from my tale? Take this enchantment off this lute!" Lythande was silent, and Tashgan leaned forward in his chair, demanding aggressively "*Can* you take off such a binding-spell, magician?"

"Perhaps I can, if the price is right, Highness," Lythande said slowly. "But why put yourself at the mercy of a stranger, a mercenary-magician? Surely the court magician who obliged your father would be more than happy to ingratiate himself with his new monarch by freeing you from this singularly inconvenient spell."

"Surely," Tashgan said glumly, "but there is one great difficulty in that. The wizard whom I have to ***thank***—" he weighted the word with another of his ill-natured scowls — "was Ellifanwy."

"Oh." Ellifanwy's messy end in the lair of a were-dragon was known from Northwander to the Southron Sea. Lythande said, "I knew Ellifanwy of old. I told Ellifanwy that she could

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

not handle any were-dragon and proffered my services for a small fee, but she begrudged the gold. And now she lies charred in the caves of the dragon-swamp."

"I am not surprised," said Tashgan. "I am sure you will agree with me that women have no business with the High Magic. Small magics, yes, like love-charms — and I must say, Ellifanwy's love-charms were superb," he added, preening himself like a peacock. "But for dragons and such, I think you will agree with me, seeing Ellifanwy's fate, that female wizards should mind their caldrons and spin love-charms."

Lythande did not answer, leaning forward to take up the lute. Again the lightning from the Blue Star on the magician's brow glared in the room.

"So you would have me undo Ellifanwy's spell? That should present no trouble," Lythande said, caressing the lute; slender fingers strayed for a moment over the strings. "What fee will you give?"

"Ah, there lies the problem," said Tashgan. "I have but little gold; the messenger who brought news of the deaths of my brothers expected to be richly rewarded, and I have lived mostly as guest these many years; given all I could desire, rich food and rich clothing, wine and women, but little in the way of ready money. But if you will unbind this spell, I shall reward you well when you come to Tschardain—"

Lythande smiled enigmatically. "I am well acquainted with the gratitude of kings, Highness." Tashgan would hardly wish Lythande's presence in Tschardain, able to tell his future subjects of their new High Lord's former ridiculous plight. "Some other way must be found."

The magician's hands lingered for a moment on Tashgan's lute. "I have taken a fancy to your lute, Highness, binding-spell and all. I have long desired to travel to Northwander. But I do not know the way. Do I assume correctly that this lute will keep its bearer on the direct path?"

Tashgan said sourly, "No native guide could do better. Should I ever stray from the path, as I have done once or twice after too much hospitality, the lute would bring me back within a few dozen paces. It is like being a child again, clinging to a nanny's hand!"

"It sounds intriguing," Lythande murmured. "I lost the only lute that meant anything to me in — shall we say, a magical encounter — and had little ready money with which to replace it; the one I bear now has a fine tone. Exchange lutes with me, noble Tashgan, and I shall travel to Northwander, and deal with the unbinding-spell at my leisure."

Tashgan hesitated only a moment. "Done," he said, and picked up Lythande's plain lute, leaving the magician to put the elaborate inlaid one, with its interlaced designs of mother-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of-pearl, into its leather case. "I leave for Tschardain at dawn. May I offer you another cup of wine, magician?"

Lythande politely declined, and bowed to Tashgan for leave to withdraw.

"So you will travel to Northwander on my circuit of castle and court? They will welcome you, magician. Good fortune." Tashgan chuckled, with a suggestive roll of his eyes. "There are many ladies bored with ladylike accomplishments. Give my love to Beauty."

"Beauty?"

"You will meet her — and many others — if you follow my lute very far," said Tashgan, licking his lips. "I almost envy you, Lythande; you have not had time to become wearied of their — friendly devices. But," he added, this time with a frank leer, "no doubt there are many new adventures awaiting me in my father's courts."

"I wish you joy of them," said Lythande, bowing gravely. On the stairs, the magician resolved that when the sun rose, Ithkar would be far behind. Tashgan might not wish anyone surviving who could tell this tale. True, he seemed grateful; but Lythande had reason to distrust the gratitude of kings.

Northward from Ithkar the hills were steeper; on some of them snow was already lying. Lightly burdened with only pack and lute, Lythande traveled with a long, athletic stride that ate up the miles.

Three days north of Ithkar, the road forked, and Lythande surveyed the paths ahead. One led down toward a city dominated by a tall castle; the other led upward, farther into the hills. After a moment's thought, Lythande took the upward road.

For a time nothing happened. The brilliant sunlight had given Lythande a headache; the magician's eyes narrowed against the sun. After a few more paces, the headache was joined with a roiling queasiness. Lythande scowled, wondering if the bread eaten for breakfast had become tainted. But under the hood of the mage-robe, Lythande could feel the burning prickle of the Blue Star.

Magic. Strong magic. . .

The lute. The enchantment. Of course. Experimentally, Lythande took a few more steps up the forest road. The sickness increased, and the pressure of the Blue Star was painful.

"So," Lythande said aloud, and turned back, retracing the path; then took the road leading down to city and castle. At once the headache diminished, the queasiness subsided, even the air seemed to smell fresher. The Blue Star was again quiescent on Lythande's brow.

"So." Tashgan had not exaggerated the enchantment of the lute. Shrugging slightly, Lythande took the road down into the city, feeling an enthusiasm and haste that was quite alien

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

to the magician's own attitude. Magic. But Lythande was no stranger to magic.

Lythande could almost feel the lute's pleasure like a giant cat purring. Then the spell was silent and Lythande was standing in the courtyard of the castle.

A liveried servant bowed.

"I welcome you, stranger. May I serve you?"

With a mental shrug, Lythande resolved to test Tashgan's truth. "I bear the lute of Prince Tashgan of Tschardain, who has returned to his own country. I come in the peace of a minstrel."

The servant bowed, if possible, even lower. "In the name of my lady, I welcome you. All minstrels are welcome here, and my lady is a lover of music. Come with me, minstrel, rest and refresh yourself, and I will conduct you to my lady."

So Tashgan had not exaggerated the tales of hospitality. Lythande was conducted to a great chamber, brought elegant food and wine, and offered a luxurious bath in a marble bath-room with water spouting from golden spigots in the shape of dolphins. Guest-garments of silk and velvet were laid ready by servants.

Alone, unspied upon (Adepts of the Blue Star have ways of knowing whether they are being watched), Lythande ate modestly of the fine foods, and drank a little of the wine, but resumed the dark mage-robe. Waiting in the elaborate guest-quarters, Lythande took the elegant lute from its case, tuned it carefully, and awaited the summons.

It was not long in coming. A pair of deferential servants led Lythande along paneled corridors and into a great salon, where a handsome, richly dressed lady awaited the musician. She extended a slender, perfumed hand.

"Any friend and colleague of Tashgan is my friend as well, minstrel; I bid you a hundred thousand welcomes. Come here." She patted the side of her elegant seat as if — Lythande thought — she were inviting one of the little lapdogs in the salon to jump up into her lap. Lythande went closer and bowed, but an Adept of the Blue Star knelt to no mortal.

"Lady, my lute and I are here to serve you."

"I am *so* fond of music," she murmured gushingly, and patted Lythande's hand. "Play for me, my dear."

With a mental shrug, Lythande decided that rumor had not exaggerated Tashgan's accomplishments. Lythande unslung the lute and sang a number of simple ballads, judging accurately the level of the lady's taste. She listened with a faintly bored smile, tapping her fingers restlessly and not even, Lythande noticed, in time to the music. Well, it was shelter for the night.

"Tashgan, dear fellow, always gave me lessons on the lute and on the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

clavier," the lady murmured. "I understand that you have come to— take over his lessons? How kind of the dear man; I am so bored here, and so alone. I spend all my time with my music. But now the palace servants will be escorting us to dinner, and my husband, the count, is so jealous. Please do play for dinner in the Great Hall. And you *will* stay for a few days, will you not, to give me — private lessons?"

Lythande said, of course, that such talents as the gods had given were all entirely at the lady's service.

At dinner in the Great Hall, the count — a huge, bluff, and not unkindly man whom Lythande liked at once — called in all his servants, nobles, housefolk and even allowed the waiters and cooks to come in from the kitchens that they might hear the minstrel's music. Lythande was glad to play a succession of ballads and songs, to give the news of Tashgan's succession to the High Lordship of Tschardain, and to tell whatever news had been making the rounds of the fair at Ithkar.

The pretty countess listened to music and news with the same bored expression. But when the party was about to break up for the night, she murmured to Lythande, "Tomorrow the count will hunt. Perhaps we could meet for my — lessons?" Lythande noted that the countess's hands were literally trembling with eagerness.

I should have known, Lythande thought. *With Tashgan's reputation as a womanizer, with all that he said about Ellifanwy's love-charms. Now what am I to do?* Lythande stared morosely at the enchanted lute, cursing Tashgan and the curiosity that impelled the exchange of instruments.

To attempt an unbinding-spell, even if it destroyed the lute? Lythande was not quite ready for that yet. It was a beautiful lute. And no matter how lascivious the countess, however eager for illicit adventure, there would be, there always were, servants and witnesses.

Whoever thought I would think of a fat chamberlain and a couple of inept ladies-in-waiting as chaperones?

All the next morning, and all the three mornings after that, Lythande, under the eyes of the servants, deferentially placed and replaced the countess's fingers on the strings of her lute, the keyboard of her clavier, murmuring of new songs, of chords and harmonies, of fingering and practice. By the end of the third morning, the Countess was huffy and sniffing, and had ceased trying to touch Lythande's hand surreptitiously on the keyboard.

"On the morrow, Lady, I must depart," Lythande said. That morning the curious pull of the enchanted lute had begun to make itself felt, and the magician knew it would grow stronger with every hour.

"Courtesy bids us welcome the guest who comes and speed the guest who departs," said the Countess, and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

for a final time she sought Lythande's slender fingers.

"Perhaps next year — when we know one another better, dear boy," she murmured.

"It shall be my pleasure to know my lady better," Lythande lied, bowing. A random thought crossed the magician's mind.

"Are you — Beauty? If so, Tashgan bade me give you his love."

The countess simpered. "Well, he called me his lovely spirit of music," she said coyly, "but who knows, he might have called me *Beauty* when he spoke of me to someone else. The dear, dear boy. Is it true he will not be coming back?"

"I fear so, madam. His duties are many in his own country now."

The countess sighed.

"What a loss to music! I tell you, Lythande, he was a minstrel of minstrels; I shall never know his like again," she said, and posed sentimentally with her hand over her heart.

"Very likely not," said Lythande, bowing to take leave.

Lythande moved northward, drawn by curiosity and by the spell of the wandering lute. It was a new experience for the Pilgrim-Adept, to travel without knowing where each day would lead, and the magician savored it with curiosity unbounded. Lythande had attempted a few simple unbinding-spells, so far without success; all the simpler spells had proved insufficient, and unlike Tashgan, Lythande did not make the mistake of underestimating Ellifanwy's spells, when the wizardess had been operating within the sphere of her own competence.

Ellifanwy might not have been able to cope with a were-dragon. But for binding-spells and enchantments, she had had no peer. Every night Lythande attempted a new unbinding-spell, at the conclusion of which the lute remained enchanted and Lythande was racking a brain that had lived three ordinary lifetimes for yet more unbinding spells.

Summer lay on the land north of Ithkar, and every night Lythande was welcomed to inn or castle, manor or Great House, where news and songs were welcomed with eagerness. Now and again a wistful matron or pretty housewife, innkeeper's daughter or merchant's consort, would linger at Lythande's side, with a lovesick word or two about Tashgan. Lythande's apparent absorption in the music; the cool, sexless voice; and the elegantly correct manner left them sighing but not offended. Once, indeed, in an isolated farmstead where Lythande had sung ancient rowdy ballads, when the farmer snored the farmer's wife crept to the straw pallet and murmured, but Lythande pretended to be asleep and the farm wife crept away without a touch.

But when the wife had crawled back to the farmer's side, Lythande

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

lay awake, troubled. Damn Tashgan and his womanizing. He might have spread joy among neglected wives and lonely ladies from Tschardain to Northwander, for so many years that even his successor was welcomed and cosseted and seduced; and for a time it had been amusing. But Lythande was experienced enough to know that this playing with fire could not continue.

And it was playing with fire, indeed. Lysande knew something of fire, the fire-elementals — The Pilgrim Adept was familiar with fire, even the fire of were-dragons. But no were-dragon alive could rival the rage of a scorned woman, and sooner or later one of them would turn nasty. The countess had simply believed Lythande was shy, and put her hopes in another year. (By then, Lythande thought, surely one of the spells would prove adequate to take off the enchantment.) It had been a close call with the farmer's wife; suppose she had tried fumbling about the mage-robe when Lythande slept?

That would have been a disaster.

For, like all Adepts of the Blue Star, Lythande cherished a Secret that might never be known; and on it all the magician's power depended. And Lythande's Secret was doubly dangerous; Lythande was a woman, the only woman ever to bear the Blue Star.

In disguise, she had penetrated the Secret Temple and the Place Which Is Not; and not till she already bore the Blue Star between her brows had she been exposed and discovered. Too late, then, for death, for she was sacrosanct till the Final Battle of Law and Chaos at the end of the world. Too late to be sent forth from them. But not too late for the curse,

Be then what you have chosen to seem, so had run the doom. *Until the end of the world, on that day when you are proclaimed a woman before any man but myself* . . . thus had spoken the ancient Master of the Star. . . *on that day you are stripped of power and on that day you may be slain.*

Traveling northward at the lute's call, Lythande sat on the side of a hill, the lute stripped of its wrappings and laid before her. If for a time this had been amusing, it was no longer. Besides, if she was not free of the spell by Yule, she would be guesting in Tashgan's own castle — and that she had no wish to do.

Now it was time for strong remedies. At first it had been mildly amusing to work her way through the simpler spells — beginning with, "Be ye unbound and opened, let no magic remain save what I myself place there," which was the sort of spell a farmer's wife might speak over her churn if she fancied some neighboring herb-wife or witch had soured her milk; and working her way up through degrees of complexity to the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ancient charm beginning, "Asmigo, Asmago . . . ," which can be spoken only in the dark of the moon in the presence of three gray mice.

None of them had worked. It was evident that, knowing of Ellifanwy's incompetence with her last were-dragon, and her success with love-charms (to Lythande, the last refuge of incompetent sorcery), Lythande had seriously underestimated Ellifanwy's spell.

And so it was time to bypass all the simpler lore of spells to bind and unbind, and proceed to the strongest unbinding-spell she knew. Unbinding-spells were not Lythande's specialty — she seldom had cause to use them. But once she had inadvertently taken upon herself a sword spell-bonded to the shrine of Larivel, and had never managed to unbind it, but had been forced to make a journey of many days to return the sword whence it had come; after which Lythande had made a special study of a few strong spells of that kind, lest her curiosity or desire for unusual experiences lead her again into such trouble. She had held this one in reserve; she had never known it to fail.

First she removed from her waist the twin daggers she bore. They had been spell-bonded to her in the Temple of the Blue Star, so that they might never be stolen nor carelessly touched by the profane; the right-hand dagger for the dangers of the lonely road in dangerous country, whether wild beast or lawless men; the left-hand dagger for menaces less material, ghost or ghast, werewolf or ghoul. She did not wish to undo that spell by accident. She carried them out of range, or what she hoped would be out of range, set her pack with them, then returned to the lute and began the circlings and preliminary invocations of her spell. At last she reached the powerful phrases that could not be spoken save at the exact moment of high noon or midnight, ending with:

"Uthriel, Mastrakal, Ithragal, Ruvaghiel, angels and archangels of the Abyss, be what is bound together undone and freed, so may it be as it was commanded at the beginning of the world. So it was, so it is, so shall it be and no otherwise!"

Blue lightning flamed from an empty sky; the Blue Star on Lythande's forehead crackled with icy force that was almost pain. Lythande could see the lines of light about the lute, pale against the noonday glare. One by one, the strings of the lute uncoiled from the pegs and slithered to the ground. The lace holding Lythande's tunic slowly unlaced itself and the strip wriggled and fell to the ground. The bootlaces, like twin serpents, crawled down the boots through the holes in reverse order and writhed like live things to the ground. The intricate knot in her belt untied itself, and the belt slithered away and fell.

Then, slowly, the threads sewing

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

her tunic at sides and shoulders unraveled, coming free stitch by stitch, and the tunic, two pieces of cloth, fell to the ground, but the process did not stop there; the embroidered braid with which the tunic was trimmed came unsewed and uncoiled bit by bit till it was mere scraps of thread lying on the grass. The side seams unstitched themselves, a little at a time, in the breeches she wore; and finally the sewn stitches of the boots crawled down the leather so that the boots lay in pieces on the ground, while Lysande still stood on the bootsoles. Only the mage-robe, being woven without seam and spelled into its final shape, maintained its original shape, although the pin came undone, the metal bending itself to slip free of its clasp, and clinked on the hard stones.

Ruefully, Lythande gathered up the remains of clothing and boots. The boots could be resewn in the next town that boasted a cobbler's shop, and there were spare clothes in the pack she had fortunately thought to carry out of reach. Meanwhile it would not be the first time a Pilgrim-Adept had gone barefoot, and it was worth the wreck of the clothing to be freed of the accursed, the disgusting, the fantastic enchantment laid on the lute.

It lay harmless and silent before the minstrel-magician; a lute, Lythande hoped, like any other, bearing no magic but its own music. Lythande found a spare tunic and breeches in the pack, girded on the twin daggers once more (marveling at any spell that could untie the mage-knot her fingers had tied, by habit, on the belt), and sat down to restring the lute.

Then she went southward, whistling.

At first Lythande thought the fierce pain between her brows was the glare of the noonday sunlight, and readjusted the deep cowl of the mage-robe so that her brow was shadowed. Then it occurred to her that perhaps the strong magic had wearied her, so she sat on a flat rock beside the trail and ate dried fruits and journey-bread from her pack, looking about to be sure she was unobserved except by a curious bird or two.

She fed the crumbs to the birds, and reslung her pack and the lute. Only when she had traveled half a mile or so did she realize that the sun was no longer glaring in her eyes and that she was traveling northward again.

Well, this was unfamiliar country; she might well have mistaken her way. She stopped, reversed her bearings, and began to retrace her steps.

An hour later she found herself traveling northward again, and when she tried to turn toward Ithkar and the southlands, the racking queasiness and pain were more than she could bear.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Damn the hedge-wizard who gave me that spell! Wryly, Lythande reflected that the curse was probably redundant. Turning northward and feeling, with relief, the slackening of the pain of the binding-spell, Lythande resigned herself. She had always wanted to see the city of Northwander: there was a college of wizards there who were said to keep records of every spell that had ever wrought its magic upon the world. Now, at least, Lythande had the best of reasons for seeking them out.

But her steps lagged resentfully on the northward road.

There was no sign of city, village, or castle. In even a small village, she could have her boots resewn — she must think up some good story to explain how they had come undone — and in a larger city, she might find a spell-candler who might sell her an unbinding-spell. Though, if the powerful spell she had already used did not work, she was unlikely to find a workable spell this side of Northwander and the college of wizards.

She had come down from the mountain and was traversing a woody region, damp from spring rains, that gradually grew wetter and wetter underfoot till Lythande's second-best boots squelched and let in water at every step. At the edges of the muck-dabbed trail were soggy trees and drooping shagroots covered in hanging moss.

I cannot believe that the lute means to lead me into this dismal bog, thought Lysande, but when, experimentally, she tried to reverse direction, the queasiness and pain returned. Indeed, the lute *was* leading her into the bog, farther and farther until it was all but impossible to distinguish between the soggy path and the mire to either side.

Where can the accursed thing be taking me? There was no sign of human habitation anywhere, nor any dwellers but the frogs who croaked off-key in dismal minor thirds. Was she indeed to sup tonight with the frogs and crocodiles who might inhabit this dreadful place? To make matters worse, it began to drizzle—though it was already so wet underfoot that it made little difference to the supersaturated ground — and then to rain in good earnest.

The mage-robe was impervious to the damp, but Lythande's feet were soaked in the mud, her legs covered with mud and water halfway to the knees, and still the lute continued to lead her farther into the mire. It was dark now; even the mage's sharp eyes could no longer discern the path, and once she measured her length on the ground, soaking what garments remained dry under the mage-robe. She paused, intending, first to make a spell of light, and then to find some form of shelter, even if only under a dry bush, to wait for light and sunshine and, perhaps, dry weather.

I cannot believe, she thought crossly, *that the lute has in sober truth led*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

me into this impassable marsh! What sort of enchantment is that?

She had come to a standstill, and was searching in her mind for the most effective light-spell, wishing that she, like Eirthe, had access to a friendly fire-elemental to supply not only light but heat, when a glimmer showed through the murky darkness and strengthened momentarily. A hunter's campfire? The cottage of a mushroom-farmer or a seller of frog-skins or some such trade that could be carried on in this infernal sloshing wilderness?

Perhaps she could beg shelter there for the night. *If this infernal lute will permit.* The thought was grim. But as she turned her steps toward the light, there was the smallest of sounds from the lute. Satisfaction? Pleasure? Was this, then, some part of Tashgan's appointed rounds? She did not admire Ellifanwy's taste, if the old sorceress had indeed set this as a part of the lute's wandering.

She plodded on through the mire at such a speed as the sucking bog underfoot would allow, and after a time came to what looked like a cottage, with light spilling through the window. Inside, the firelight was almost like the light of a fire-elemental, which came near to searing Lythande's eyes; but when she covered them and looked again, the light came from a perfectly ordinary fire in an ordinary fireplace, and by its glow Lythande saw a little old lady, in a gown of bottle green, after the fashion of a few generations ago, with a white linen mutch covering her hair, pottering about the fire.

Lythande raised her hand to knock, but the door swung slowly open and a soft, sweet voice called out, "Come in, my dear; I have been expecting you."

The star on Lythande's brow prickled blue fire. Magic, then, nearby, and the little old lady was a hearth-witch or a wise-woman, which could explain why she had made her home in this howling wilderness. Many women with magical powers were neither liked nor welcomed among mankind. Lythande, in her male disguise, had not been subjected to this, but she had seen it all too often during her long life.

She stepped inside, wiping the moisture from her eyes. Where had the little old lady gone? Facing her was a tall, imposing, beautiful woman, in a gown of green brocade and satin with a jeweled circlet in the satiny dark curls. Her eyes were fixed, in dismay and disbelief, on the lute and on Lythande. Her deep voice had almost the undertone of a beast's snarl.

"Tashgan's lute! But where is Tashgan? How did you come by his instrument?"

"Lady, it is a long story," Lythande said, through the burning of the Blue Star that told her she was surrounded by alien magic, "and I have been wandering half the night in this ac-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

cursed bog, and I am soaked to the very skin. I beg of you, allow me to warm myself at your fire, and you shall be told everything; there is time for the telling of many long tales before the Final Battle between Law and Chaos."

"And why should you curse my chosen home, this splendid marsh?" the lady said, with a scowl coming between her fine arched brows, and Lythande drew a long breath.

"Only that in this — blessed expanse of bog and marsh and frogs, I have become drenched, muddied, and lost," she said, and the lady gestured her to the fire.

"For the sake of Tashgan's lute, I make you welcome, but I warn you, if you have harmed him, slain him, or taken his lute by force, stranger, this is your last hour; make, therefore, the best of it."

Lythande went to the fire, pulled off the mage-robe, and disposed of it on the hearth where the surface water and mud would dry; removed the sodden boots and stockings, the outer tunic and trousers, standing in a linen under-tunic and drawers to dry them in the fire-heat. She was not too sure of customs this near to Northwander, but she surmised that the man she appeared to be would not, for modesty's sake, strip to the skin before a strange woman, which custom of modesty safeguarded her disguise.

Lythande could — briefly, when she must — cast over herself the glamour of a naked man; but she hated doing it, and the illusion was dangerous, for it could not hold long, and not at all, she suspected, in the presence of this alien magic.

The lady, meanwhile, busied herself about the fire — in a way, Lythande thought as she watched her out of the corner of her eye, better fitted to the little lady she had first appeared to be. When Lysande's undertunic stopped steaming, she hung the outer clothing to dry over a rack, and dipped up soup from a kettle, cut bread from a crusty loaf, and set it on a bench before the fire.

"I beg of you, share my poor supper; it is hardly worthy of a great magician, as you seem to be, but I heartily make you welcome to it."

The vows of an Adept of the Blue Star forbade Lythande to eat or drink in the sight of any man; however, women did not fall under the prohibition, and whether this was the little old hearth-witch she had first surmised, or whether the beautiful lady put on the hearth-witch disguise that she might not be easy prey for such robbers or beggarly men as might make their way into the bog, she was at least a woman. So Lythande ate and drank the food, which was delicious; the bread had the very texture and scent she remembered from her half-forgotten home country.

"My compliments to your cook, Lady; this soup is like to what my old nanny, in a far country, made for me

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

when I was a child." And even as she spoke, she wondered: *Is it some enchantment laid on the food?*

The lady smiled and came to sit on the bench beside Lythande. She had Tashgan's enchanted lute in her arms, and her fingers strayed over it lovingly, bringing small, kindly sounds. "You see in me both cook and feaster, servant and lady; none dwells here but I. Now tell me, stranger with the Blue Star, how came you by Tashgan's lute? For if you took it from him by force, be assured I shall know; no lie can dwell in my presence."

"Tashgan made me a free gift of the lute," Lythande said, "and to my best knowledge, he is well, and Lord of Tschardain; his brothers perished, and he returned to his home. But first he must free himself of the enchantment of the lute, which had other ideas as to how he should spend his time. And this is the whole of the tale, Lady."

The lady sniffed, a small, disdainful sniff. She said, "and for that, being a little lord in a little palace, he gave up the lute? Freely, you say, unforced? A minstrel gave up a lute enchanted to his measure? Stranger, I never thought Tashgan a fool!"

"The tale is true as I have told it," said Lythande. "Nor is the lute such a blessing as you might think, Lady, for in that world out there beyond the — blessed confines of this very marsh, minstrels are given less honor than lords or even magicians. And freedom to wander whither one wills is perhaps even more to be desired than being at the mercy of a wandering lute."

"Do you speak with bitterness, minstrel?"

"Aye," said Lythande with heartfelt truth. "I have spent but one summer wandering at the behest of this particular lute, and I would willingly render it to anyone who would take its curse!"

"Curse, you say?"

The lady sprang up from the bench; her eyes glared like coals of fire at Lythande, fire that curled and melted about her with sizzling heat; fire that glowed and flared and streamed upward like the wings of a fire-elemental. "Curse, you say, when it brought Tashgan yearly to my dwelling?"

Lythande stood very still. The heat of the Blue Star was painful between her brows. *I do not know who this lady may be, or what,* she thought, *but she is no simple hearth-witch.*

She had laid aside her belt and twin daggers; she stood unprotected before the anger and the streaming fire, and could not reach the dagger that was effective against the creatures of enchantment. Nor, she thought, had it come yet to that.

"Madam, I speak for myself; Tashgan spoke not of curse but of enchantment. I am a Pilgrim-Adept, and cannot live except when I am free to wander where I will. And even Tash-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

gan could not linger as long beneath your gracious roof and accept your hospitality as long as his heart might desire; and I doubt not he found that a kind of curse."

Slowly the fire faded, the streamers of blue dimming out and dying, and the lady shrank to a normal size and looked at Lythande with a smile that was still arrogant, but had a kind of pleased simper in it.

In the name of all the probably nonexistent gods of Ithkar, what is this woman? For woman she is, and, like all women, vain and greedy for praise, Lythande thought with scorn.

"Be seated, stranger, and tell me your name."

"I am Lythande, a Pilgrim-Adept of the Blue Star; and Tashgan gave me this lute that he might return to become Lord of Tschardain. I am not to blame for his folly, that he willingly forwent the chance of beholding again your great loveliness." And even as she spoke, Lythande had misgivings; could any woman actually swallow such incredible flattery? But the woman — or was she a powerful sorceress? was all but purring.

"Well, his loss is his own choice, and it has brought you here to me, my dear. Have you, then, Tashgan's skill with the lute?"

That would not take much doing, thought Lythande, but said modestly that of this, only the lady must be the judge. "Is it your desire that I play for you, madam?

"Please. But shall I bring you wine? Tashgan, dear boy, loved the wine I serve."

"No, no wine," Lythande said. She wanted her wits fully about her. "I have dined so well, I would not spoil that taste in memory. Rather, I would enjoy your presence with my mind undimmed by the fumes of wine," she added, and the lady beamed.

"Play, my dear."

Lythande set her fingers to the lute, and sang, a love-song from the distant hills of her homeland.

A single sweet apple clings
to the top of the branch;
The pickers did not forget
But could not reach;
Like the apple, you are not forgotten,
But only too high and far from my hands.
I long to taste that forbidden sweetness.

Lythande looked up at last at the woman by the fire. Well, she had done a foolish thing; she should have sung a comic ballad or a tale of knightly and heroic deeds. This was not the first time she had seen a woman eager for more than flirtation, thinking Lythande a handsome young man. Was that one of the qualities of the enchantment of the lute, that it inspired women hearers with desire for the player? Judging by what had happened on this journey, she would not be at all surprised.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"It grows late," said the lady softly. "Time for a night of love such as I often shared with Tashgan, dear lad." And she reached out to touch Lythande lightly on the shoulder; Lythande remembered the farmer's wife. A woman rejected could be dangerous.

Lythande mumbled; "I could not presume so high; I am no lord but a poor minstrel."

"In my domain," said the lady, "minstrels are honored above princes or lords."

This was too ridiculous, Lythande thought. She had loved women; but if this woman had been Tashgan's mistress, she would not seek among women for a lover. Besides, Lythande was not happy with the thought of Tashgan's leavings.

The *geas* she was under was literal; she might reveal herself to no *man. I am not sure this harpy is a woman,* Lythande thought, *but I am certain she is no man.*

"Do you mock me, minstrel?" the woman demanded. "Do you think yourself too good for my favors?" Once again it seemed that fire streamed from her hair, from the spread wings of her sleeves. And at that moment Lythande knew what she saw.

"Alnath," she whispered and held out her hand. Yet nothing so simple as a fire-elemental; this was a were-dragon in full strength, and she remembered the fate of Ellifanwy.

"Lady," she said, "you do me too much honor, for I am not Tashgan, nor even a man. I am but a humble minstrel woman."

She bowed her head before the flames suddenly surrounding her. Were-dragons were always of uncertain temper; but this one chose to be amused; flamed licked around Lythande with the gusting laughter, but Lythande knew that if she showed the slightest fear, she was doomed.

Calling up the memory of the fire-elemental, Lythande made a clear picture in her mind of Alnath perched on her wrist, flames sweeping gracefully upward. She felt again the sense of kinship she had experienced with the little fire-elemental, and it enabled her to look up and smile at the were-dragon confronting her.

The gusts of laughter subsided to a chuckle, and once again it was a woman, not a dragon, confronting Lythande; the little hearth-witch. "And did Tashgan know your sex — or did he expect you to take over his round in all things?"

Lythande said ruefully "The latter, judging by the instructions he gave me," and the lady was laughing again.

"You must have had a most *interesting* journey here, my dear!"

Lythande's mind suddenly started working furiously, recalling quite clearly the instructions Tashgan had given her. He had definitely been amused about something; yet Lythande was sure he had not known her secret. No,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

what amused him had been . . . "Beauty!" The lady was regarding her attentively. "By any chance, Lady, was he given to calling you — Beauty?"

"The dear boy! He remembered!" The lady was positively simpering.

He certainly did, Lythande thought grimly. *And* boyish *is a mild description of his sense of humor! Perhaps he thought me as vulnerable to playing with fire as Ellifanwy?* It would have amused Tashgan to send her to share Ellifanwy's fate. Aloud, she said, "He asked me to give you his love." Her hostess looked pleased, but Lythande decided that a bit more flattery would probably help. "Of all the sacrifices he made for his throne, you were the one he regretted most. His duty called him to Tschardain." She hesitated slightly, remembering the look in the dragon-woman's eyes at the sight of the lute. "If you would not object, I think this affair would make a splendid romantic ballad." By now the were-dragon was virtually purring.

"Nothing would delight me more, my dear, than to serve as inspiration to art."

"And," Lythande continued, "I would be honored — and I know it would give Tashgan the greatest pleasure — if you would accept this lute as a small token of the devotion we feel toward you."

Flame flared almost to the ceiling; but the were-dragon's face was wreathed in joyous smiles as she gently took up the lute and caressed the strings.

Early next morning, Lythande took cordial leave of her hostess. As she picked a careful way through the bog, she could hear the strumming of the lute behind her. The were-dragon had more musical ability than Prince Tashgan, that was certain, but the ballad formed in Lythande's mind was not of love bravely sacrificed to duty, but of a wandering were-dragon minstrel and and unexpected guest at the Yule-feast in Tschardain. Making a mental note to spend Yule in Northwander — if not even farther north — Lythande left the bog behind her and went laughing up the northward road.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

In which a feminist in Madison, Wisconsin tires of words and effects a miracle that breeds some strange if inevitable reactions.

Lo, How An Oak E'er Blooming

BY
SUZETTE HADEN ELGIN

The day that she caused the miracle, Willow Severty was just plain tired. The women in the audience had been thrashing her a good half hour, and she'd been patiently bearing that, working away one word at a time toward somehow making them understand. But they were angry, at her and at the world, and they would not let Willow be. And when words failed her, Willow turned in utter weariness to deeds. One deed, to be precise.

She stood there sagging under the lash of their tongues, looking more and more battered and useless every minute. And then she gave herself a sort of shake, the way a tired animal will shake off water, and she raised her two hands before her to ward the other women off.

"That's enough," she said, standing there at the front of the room before the rows of chairs, beside the speaker's lectern. "That's more than enough. I'm sorry you're so dissatisfied with me, but I can't do any better. And I tell you you're wrong, with that laundry list of yours. I tell you there've been laws written down since first men could record their wickedness and their pride — and there has always been a way to make those laws no more than chicken scratches. Laws are like wars — of their making there is no end, and they're not worth warm spit. I tell you, what we need is a *miracle.*"

They would have interrupted her if she'd paused, and she knew that, so she went right on.

"A miracle!" Willow said again. "Something that money and power and law and science and war *cannot do.* I've had enough of words — they ignore words anyway — it's time now

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

for *signs*. Signs and portents. We need a miracle to show them. . . ." And she had smiled an exhausted smile and added, "Just a very small miracle will do. It doesn't have to be the levitation of the Pentagon. It will be sufficient if — Willow looked around her, and out over their heads toward the windows at the back of the conference room, and she saw something that would serve her purpose. "It would be sufficient for that bare oak tree, standing out there naked in the snow, to burst all at once into glorious bloom. That would be miracle enough."

And she had drawn a deep breath, and it was so.

Well. It isn't every day that a big oak flowers in the middle of deep winter, or any other time. *This* flowering was preposterous; it offended all the sensibilities. The experts came in twos and threes — the botanists and the biologists and the linear and nonlinear dynamicists and the horticulturists and even the physicists. When the careful dissection of one of the perfect yellow blooms, as big as a teacup, proved beyond any question that it was indeed a real flower, a genuine plant form growing, and not — as they had first assumed — a creation of plastic or silk or some other man-made substance, there were cautious articles in the scholarly journals about the matter. With photographs of cross sections of the blossom and its parts under the microscope, from a variety of angles and points of view. The botanists, who'd been rather out of it the past decade or so, preened themselves in the center circle of scientific attention and faced the difficult questions.

"What *is* it, exactly?"

"An anomaly," they said solemnly.

"What *are* those flowers?"

"We don't know. Sorry."

"Well, how could such a thing *be*?"

"We don't know that either. That is the nature of an anomaly."

No one among the experts could explain why, when you took one golden flower from the tree, another formed immediately to take its place. They were soon sorry they had even mentioned that, because it drew great crowds of people determined to take home an armful of the wonderful blooms for themselves, and it became necessary to set up a permanent security guard around the oak, and build a ten-foot-tall steel chain-link fence and a small guardhouse, and set a Doberman loping along the perimeter of the secured area.

The media were less cautious than the scientists. The *National Enquirer* had a headline half a page high shrieking "ROSES BLOOM ON WINTER OAK! BISHOPS DECLARE MIRACLE!" Not that the blossoms were roses, or any other flower identifiable by man, but it was close enough. It conveyed the sense of the situation.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The commercial interests were not cautious either. By the end of the first week, even as the fence was still going up in the muddy trampled snow, there were hot dog stands and coffee-and-doughnut wagons. And there were souvenir vendors selling plastic oaks with yellow plastic flowers in a wide range of sizes, with a small plaque at the base reading "Replica of the Miracle Oak" in Gothic letters.

The churches were at first not only interested but eager. Miracles are not all that common, and a miracle that would go on twenty-four hours a day, standing up sturdily to every variety of scientific investigation, could not be said to exist anywhere else in the world today. But after the first wave of theologians and evangelists had spoken with Willow Severty, the churches drew back, bruised into a confused and uneasy silence.

The facts appeared to be beyond dispute; there had been forty-three witnesses inside the room when Willow called for that oak to bloom in the snow, and another dozen passersby outside who could not possibly be claimed to have been subject to mob hysteria. The women in the room agreed unanimously that when they had turned to look where Willow was looking, the tree had been there before their eyes in its full blazing glory of golden flowers. And the people outside were in full agreement — one minute there'd been an oak there, bare and black like any other February oak; and then, all of an instant, the tree had been covered branch after branch with flowers. The people persisted, despite the scientists, in calling the flowers roses. There seemed to be no question but that Willow Severty had called those roses forth.

And so the churchmen went to Willow prepared to be reverent, prepared to find *her* reverent, and they came away in great confusion. The woman was not a Catholic, she was not a Baptist, she was not even a Christian! The sudden hopes of the Jews, the Muslims, the Druids, the Wiccans — the list was endless — were promptly dashed; Willow Severty accepted no denomination of any known religion.

"Do you believe in God?" they asked her, and she smiled at them and went on knitting. When they insisted on an answer, Willow looked up with obvious distaste and said, "Well, would you prefer to think I did it all by my*self*, gentlemen?" And she grinned in a way that offended them mightily, and added, "Or maybe you'd prefer to say the devil did it?"

The idea that Evil might have power sufficient to set that golden-flowered oak in the snow and maintain it there was simply not tolerable. They writhed under the notion, and rejected it for the sake of their sanity. On the other hand, the idea that this unprepossessing female, dumpy and middle-aged and badly dressed, had

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

managed to call forth a miracle without assistance from any organized system of religious doctrine was also intolerable. Of course she had not done it herself; that was silly. But Whom had Willow Severty called upon?

They demanded to know if she could do it again, and she did laugh at them then.

"Gentlemen," she said, "can you do it *once*?"

And when they admitted that they could not, she told them she would wait. "You do it once," she said, "and then we'll see if I can do it twice."

They called her impudent, and blasphemous, and she laid it out for them. "You can't do it," she said. "Not for any amount of money. Not with the most powerful weapon in your arsenals. Not with the most advanced of your technologies. Not with all your mighty faiths combined. Perhaps it's time you reconsidered the value of all those things, gentlemen."

And the oak went right on blooming.

Seedlings came up around its base and were taken away in armored cars to be planted in greenhouse laboratories — where they died at once. Planted outside, set in carefully guarded circles of earth, they died equally promptly. Subjected to grafting, subjected to layering, subjected to cloning, subjected to techniques so advanced that they were military secrets — they died. Every attempt to produce or reproduce them failed. When the time came for acorns, the oak had them in abundance, side by side with the steadfast flowers, but dissection and analysis showed the acorns to be only the ordinary acorns of ordinary oaks; and seedlings forced from those acorns were ordinary seedlings. It might be a century before those seedlings burst into flower, if indeed that was what they were destined someday to do.

It wasn't enough to say, "Oh, it's just a new species of oak, which flowers when it grows to a certain age." Because it was much worse than that; it violated every natural law. There were plants known to grow with nearly miraculous speed, other and entirely acceptable plants. But there is no plant that bears flowers that never were buds and that never fade or fall; there are no *changeless* plants. True, if you took a bloom away from the oak, it faded and died like any flower fades and dies; but so long as the flowers were left on the tree, they were immune to all natural processes. High winds did not shake them loose; searing heat did not make them limp or brown the edges of their petals; the bitterest cold in no way altered their texture or fragrance. A laser would burn one away, as would a torch; but however many you burned (subject the entire time to furious shouts from worshipers demanding that you cease your desecration), another perfect flower

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

would form to replace the burned ones the moment you set the implement of destruction aside. And it was the same with chemicals, with electric currents, with sound waves, with every mechanism the experts could devise. They were afraid to try a nuclear weapon, right there in the middle of Madison, Wisconsin, but they had no reason to think the results of such a trial would have been any different.

Pressed for comment, Willow Severty said, "Well, loving kindness, what you all call 'grace,' is like that. The more you use it, the more of it there is." And she went back to her struggle to make ends meet, while the scientists applied for ever larger grants to study the oak tree.

Some of the women found it strange that the offers made to Willow in the first few days — the book contracts, the movie and television contracts, the proposals for Willow Severty dolls and lunch boxes and bumper stickers and coffee mugs — were all withdrawn before Willow could decide whether any of them were worth signing.

Willow didn't find it strange. She had been a little surprised that the media hoopla had been allowed to continue as long at it had, once it became obvious that the oak was no seven-day wonder but proposed to *endure*. And as the day approached that would mark the one-year anniversary of the miracle, Willow bought a ticket on the Greyhound bus and took her knitting and withdrew as quietly as she could to a place where nobody would expect her to go. Willow had good sense, and endless patience; she went to the slums of Detroit.

"What are we going to *do?*"

The question hovered like a banner in the air, over the heads of the assembled members of Project Bad Oak. They would have been pleased if an answer had hovered too, but there was no answer. Everything had been tried, and everything had failed. The woman Willow Severty had brought the oak tree upon the world, and no amount of money or force of technology had proved adequate to duplicate or explain away what she had done. A steady pressure on the channels for dissemination of information had purged them of all mention of the miracle or its worker, but that was not going to be enough.

The tree was still *there*. It still *loomed*. Anyone who chose to go to Madison, Wisconsin, could see that for himself. The deadly chemicals injected into the tree's roots by stealth, in the dead of night, had had no effect at all. Sound waves, microwaves, electric shocks, salt — yes, salt, at the suggestion of an agent who knew what salt did to otherwise indestructible purple thistles on his farm — all had failed to bother the tree. It could

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

be described only as *flourishing.*

And the people talked. In a variety of languages and social dialects, they talked, but they were all saying the same thing in the end: "Huh. *You* can't *do* that, can you? Damn straight, you can't!" People, the mass of people, were snickering.

Church attendance had fallen off, as had college enrollments and enlistments in the military. Registrations to vote were down by several percent, as were crimes of violence and hospitalizations. Physicians were reporting a decline in number of patients seen; retail sales were off just a tad; lawyers languished for lack of altercations. It was all small numbers, and any one of these taken by itself would not have been worth noticing. But as a general and pervasive trend, it was serious.

"Gentlemen," said the secretary of defense, "what we are seeing is the steady growth of a nationwide disrespect for all the institutions of our society. *Something must be done."*

"But how the hell did —"

"Never mind how!" hissed the secretary of defense. "We don't *know* how, and we don't have time to worry about it. Willow Severty told that gaggle of hysterical feminists that a flowering oak tree was all they needed to make us look pathetic. And she was *right!"* We can't start what she started, we can't do what she did, and we look like impotent asses. We look like *wimps* . We have to stop it, before it gets out of hand. And because what we're dealing with here is not civilized or decent, but is primitive superstition, we cannot allow the first anniversary of Willow Severty's so-called miracle to arrive. We *cannot* allow that kind of symbol to be created in the public mind."

"Why 'so-called' miracle, Mister Secretary?" asked the priest who sat there as representative of religion.

"Oh, shut up, Father," said the rest of the men, and he did. It was hard to be strong from a position of total bewilderment. The priest was *absolutely* certain that God Almighty Himself had set that tree aflower and kept it so, but *why?* Why would He play so monstrous a joke upon His faithful, and for so *long?* And why had He not ended it in response to the thousands of contemplative religious praying round the clock these past six months for Him to do so? It was whispered that in the church that an abbess — an abbess! — had been heard to say, "'Be not afraid; God is not mocked.' . . . . Oh, yeah?" The good father shuddered, and he crossed himself discreetly.

"Well, what do you propose we *do*?" Half a dozen of the officials present asked the same question as if they had rehearsed, all of them sounding fretful, as befit the powerful made to look foolish by the powerless.

"We're going to cut the godforsaken cursed oak tree *down!"* declared the secretary of defense, and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the priest crossed himself again, too horrified at the "godforsaken" and the "cursed" to concern himself about discretion.

"That's *all?"* asked a much-decorated general in the silence. "Just cut it down?"

"Well . . . not quite all," admitted the secretary. "A story has been leaked to the press and will be appearing tomorrow . . . . It seems the tree has been discovered to be giving off powerful carcinogens into the air." He glanced at a three-by-five card in his hand and began reeling off the statistics. Leukemias, up 40 percent in Madison. Cancer of the breast, up 80 percent. Cancer of the uterus and cervix, up 60 percent. Cancer of—"

"We follow you, Mister Secretary," observed the general. "Who's breaking the story?"

"The *Washington Post,* CBS News, and *Reader's Digest.* And the *National Enquirer."*

"Dear heaven, they'll call it witchcraft!" objected the priest.

"So?" the secretary of defense sneered. "Let them! We will have *stopped* it, Father."

"Are you sure?"

"You betcha. Unless someone here can convince me that there's one good reason to do otherwise — and it will take some doing, gentlemen, I warn you — at precisely 0200 tomorrow morning, that tree will be cut to the ground, incinerated to the last centimeter of its smallest twig and root, and the ground where it grew will be sterilized. And after *that*, my friends, we will pave the entire area over, right out to the perimeter, and put up a Kentucky Fried Chicken place where the tree used to be. Madison, Wisconsin can use another fried-chicken place. And another parking lot."

He shuffled his three-by-five cards, raised his eyebrows, and waited. And then he said, "Well? Does this mean nobody intends to argue?"

Six months earlier, they might have argued. The scientists would have demanded more time to study the phenomenon. The representatives of the humanities might have pleaded for restraint in the face of such magnificence, for awe in the presence of such mystery. The men from business and industry might have hesitated — there is something about an apparently inexhaustible resource that might, under adequate controls and in the proper hands, repay further investigation. And so on. But now they were wiser men, even the men of the cloth, and they knew a menace when they saw one a-blooming. They offered no objections.

At two o'clock in the morning, the surrounding population already evacuated by grim law-enforcement and emergency personnel announcing a life-threatening emergency that could not be explained for lack of time, it began. A crew of men who

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

were more uncomfortable than they would have been willing to admit cut and burned the oak, flat to the ground. A bulldozer made certain no least thread of a root was left, turning the ground over not once but three times, at the direct order of the Department of Defense, although the source of the order for public information was the EPA. A sterilizing substance was spread over the barren earth, and a concrete mixer brought in and parked at the ready on the site. When dawn broke over Madison, Wisconsin, the morning news carried reports of a terrible danger safely eliminated by Our Tax Dollars at Work. Along with a picture of the blasted earth where the Doberman now ran superfluously inside the fence, with nothing left to guard but a bulldozer and a cement mixer.

There was outrage for a few days, but as people read the story in the *Reader's Digest,* and listened to CBS News, the word spread and the protests died quickly. From the pulpits, people were gravely reminded that the Holy Bible not only admits that witches are real but declares that they must not be allowed to live. In Detroit, Willow Severty smiled to herself when the agents turned up and began following her about. She understood that it would be contrary to the national interest for her to become a martyr during this brief period before the whole foolish episode faded from the public consciousness.

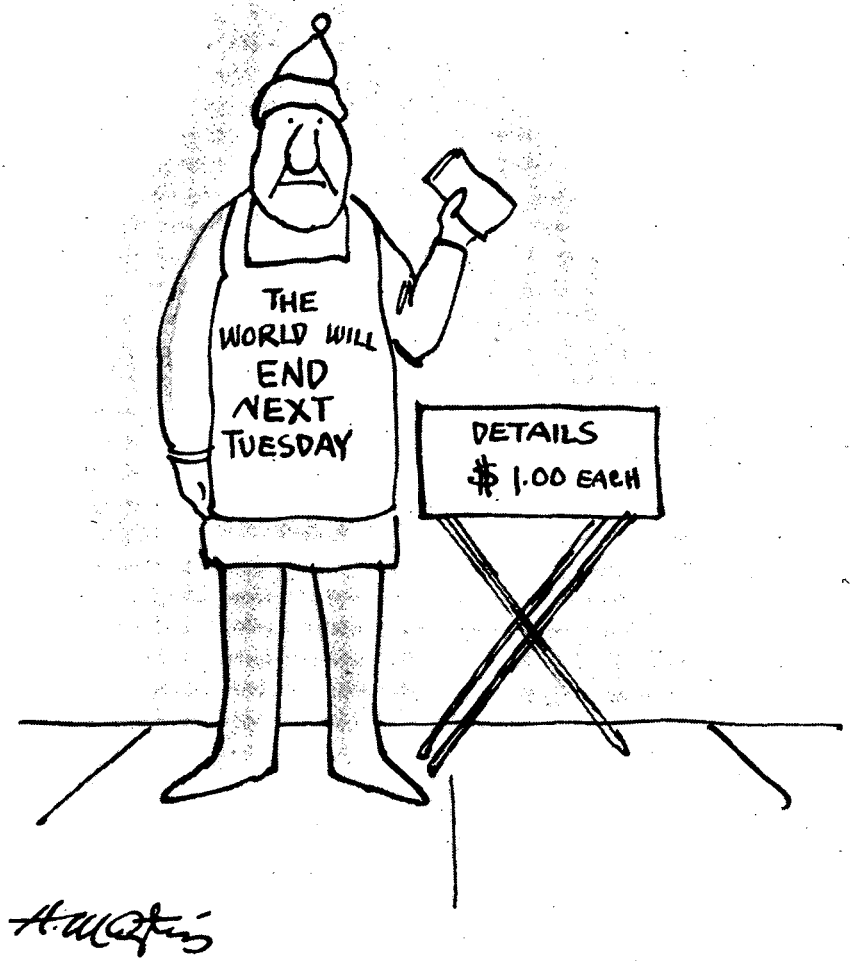
The feminists muttered, "All the same, she *did* it, and none of *them* could do it," but nobody pays any attention to feminists except other feminists. And the feminists themselves had never cared much for Willow Severty; they muttered awhile, but in the backs of their minds, they were thinking again of legislation.

So it was that not a single camera crew was present on the anniversary of the miracle of the oak tree in Madison, Wisconsin. Only the construction crew putting up the Kentucky Fried Chicken place, and one lone security guard, and the bored Doberman, were there when the ground began to heave and quake under the concrete. They clung to the framework of the fried-chicken place as best they could, and got out of the way as best they could.

It was a darned shame that Willow Severty could not have been there to see the spectacle. The great oak rose straight up into the air where the chicken-frying machines were to have been, its sturdy roots shoving the spanking new parking lot's surface aside and piling it up along the fissures. The tree was heavily laden with yellow flowers that looked very much like roses, and the crisp February air was filled with their fragrance. The snow was a nice touch, falling softly to cover up the broken concrete and lightly lace the edges of the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

blossoms' petals with white. It was a regular picture postcard, doing Madison proud; it was positively a symbol, there in the center of town. Peace on earth, it said. Good will to men.



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Installment 14½: *In Which The Unheard-Of Is Heard, Kind Of*

In the November 1985 issue of a magazine called *Starlog* there appears the first half of an interview with your humble essayist, given to a very nice young man named Lee Goldberg. Mostly, it concerns my work for the past year on *The Twilight Zone*.

Mr. Goldberg began his introductory notes about me with the following sentence: "No one will ever accuse Harlan Ellison of keeping his mouth shut."

There is a widespread belief that columnists such as myself or Budrys or Erma Bombeck or John Simon or Robert Evans always have a ready opinion on anything that occurs anywhere in the world at any time, past, present or future.

That is because we have deadlines.

We are expected to find a new crusade every time we put pen to paper. We are expected to plumb the depths of every isolated incident, and we are expected to track the path of every emerging trend. And for our sins of regularity in print (or in my case, semi-regularity) we are rewarded with the encomiums Big Mouth, Know-It-All and Vicious Critic.

if one of us raves about a film, say for instance *Dune*, not only is it instantly forgotten that we praised something, but we are pilloried for not following the party line that *Dune* was awful. (This is much like my sit-

Copyright © 1985 by The Kilimanjaro Corporation

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

uation as regards fiction. Because I once wrote a story in which — for good and sufficient plot reasons — a young woman is killed and eaten by a dog, I am stereotyped by casual readers of my work as one who writes nothing but stories of violence and cannibalism. When I wrote three pages of an X-Men "jam" comic book, proceeds of which went to feed starving children in Ethiopia, a reviewer in *Amazing Heroes* wrote, "Harlan Ellison who, perhaps surprisingly, wrote the most upbeat and positive of the Entity-induced nightmares." Not surprising, perhaps, to those who have read, say, "Jeffty is Five" or "Paladin of the Lost Hour" or "With Virgil Oddum at the East Pole," or any of the hundreds of other stories I've written in which friendship, courage, kindness and true love are the themes. But you get what I'm trying to say, don't you?)

And if we rationally and painstakingly savage a film we think is ka-ka, like f'instance *Back to the Future*, we get letters such as this one from Forrest J. Ackerman:

"Do you suppose you're the only person on Earth who didn't like/love BACK TO THE FUTURE? Or can you name me five others? Or don't you give a damn how many cinemicrocephalons there are in the world?"

To which I replied: "Forry, with affection for you personally, I will let Anatole France respond to your question. 'If fifty million people say a foolish thing, it is still a foolish thing.'"

And so the general feeling is that we are Big Mouth, Know-It-All and Vicious Critic. Because we are required to meet the deadlines by which the magazines in which we appear live and die. When you turn to our columns, there we are, opening our big mouths. Because that is what we're being paid to do. And so the Lee Goldbergs of the world say, "No one will ever accuse Harlan Ellison of keeping his mouth shut."

But, in weary truth, there are times when some of us *don't* have anything to say. Times when we haven't seen any films that require analysis. Times when we start an essay on why it is that most sf writers cannot write television scripts, or on why after ten years of publicly denouncing tv I went to work for *The Twilight Zone*, or . . . well, whatever. But we have those deadlines, so we do it.

And all those who cannot wait to pounce on the latest essay as yet another example of the Big Mouth Know-It-All Vicious Critic shooting off his bazoo nod sagely and say, "Doesn't he ever shut his mouth?"

For all of those kindly folks, and for those of you who know what it is not to have any particular opinion burning in you from time to time, I offer this installment.

I haven't anything to say this time. Maybe next time. Maybe not.

Mr. Goldberg: the millennium is at hand.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

F&SF T-Shirts in Two Colors

FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION

P.O. Box 56, Cornwall, Ct. 06753

Send me _____ F&SF shirts at $6.50 each, enclosed.

Name _____

Address _____

City _____

State _____ Zip _____

Small ☐ Medium ☐ Large ☐ Extra Large ☐

☐ Red ☐ Navy

Add $1.00 for Canadian and foreign postage.

F&SF T-shirts make a great gift and are available only from this magazine at the bargain price of $6.50 each, which includes postage and handling. These handsome shirts come in navy blue with the original F&SF logo imprinted in white, or in red with blue imprinting. All sizes in stock and shipped as soon as we receive the coupon or a separate order.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Jerrie Hurd has been published in several literary magazines, but this is her first SF story to be published. She is a graduate of the University of Colorado, now lives in Portland, Oregon and teaches at Clark College in Vancouver. She writes that she has long been interested in computers and music synthesizers, the latter interest providing the idea for the first-rate story you are about to read.

Observations On Sirenian Singing

BY
JERRIE W. HURD

I sat facing the investigator across a smooth table in a briefing room aboard an orbiting outpost half a billion miles from home. The investigator was older, a Diogian male dressed in uniform, wearing no makeup, the symbol of his rank displayed on his chest. When he spoke, he spoke in even, measured tones, always in officialese, a language carefully formulated to remove all bias from the proceedings, but he kept coming back to the fact that the observations in my report were irregular. That betrayed his mind-set.

I was dressed in female uniform, not wanting to be thought androgynously coy. My hair was cropped, my skin tinted, my scent subdued, all according to regulations for an Earth-origin officer. I sat erect and alert, never allowing myself to glance down because I knew — contrary to cross-cultural conditioning, which was supposed to eliminate planetal-based biases between members of the Service — a glance downward under examination was likely to be interpreted by a Diogian male as a sign of weakness. So I remained conscious of every movement I made, every statement I uttered, every aspect of my being attuned to convey self-assurance. But I'd been probed by this officer for hours going over and over my reports until I wondered how long we could keep up the charade. Clearly he believed he was doing his job and I hadn't done mine.

I wanted to reach across the table and grab him by his wide, scaly shoulders. I wanted to scream, "Listen, you bastard, how can you keep missing the point? It's right there, right in front of you, right in the reports that you don't like." But I'd been in the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Science Service too long. I was too professional for that.

I leaned back in my chair and eyed the opaque one-way wall behind the investigator. We were alone in the room, but the proceedings were open to anyone who wanted to watch. I wondered who was beyond the wall, listening. I wondered if I'd planted seeds of doubt in anyone's mind.

The investigator flipped through the last few screens of data that made up my report. He cleared his throat. "This concludes the review process, unless you have additional data for the official record. Being mutually and fully advised, I ask you for objections. Otherwise I will declare this hearing formally closed, subject to a judgment to be rendered upon proper advisement at a later date. Do you have objections?"

"No," I said and felt empty — a sense of an end to the affair and my failure. It was over. Then, catching my breath, I said, "Yes, I'd like to . . . I request the indulgence of my right to make a final statement."

I don't know exactly what prompted me to say that. The outcome of the proceeding was inevitable. I had no illusions about making the investigator understand. But I was entitled to make a final statement before being mustered out of the Service in disgrace and being sent home without compensation or hope of being hired for another professional position, and so I guess it was with a sense of having little to lose that I took that option.

The investigator looked up. He twitched one eyelid. "You have additional data not already on the record?"

"Yes," I said, thinking of the logs — the videos and the rest of the official report made up of disks of stored sound reduced to minimal audio notation analyzed and cataloged by the computers, and my notes and the notes of my crew carefully worded in professional terms without judgment, prejudice, or emotion. I dropped officialese and spoke informally in the vernacular. "There are things raw data can never adequately express."

He paused. He shifted his weight. "I officially advise you," he said, still using the formal language, "that all statements whether spoken officially or informally must by law be considered a part of the record and not subject to revision."

"I understand."

"Being advised," he said, "you may proceed."

I drew a deep breath and mentally wrestled with how and where to begin. . . .

I was on vacation, having just completed an extended tour of fieldwork, when I was called back to active duty and asked to take a special assignment as head of a field team on the newly discovered planet of Sirenia. The previous field team had aban-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

doned the planet without deciphering the language being used by the native humanoids. That had delayed the completion of impact studies and the making of official contact, which was complicated by the fact that Sirenia had been surveyed and found to be rich in several rare minerals, and mining contracts had already been awarded. I wasn't excited about being called in to take over, knowing I'd be working under that kind of pressure, but somebody had to do it, and I was assured by my superior that I had been picked because of my excellent record. Also, I was told that a full investigation into the activities of the previous field team had shown gross irregularities and that there was no reason to believe decoding and translation could not be achieved in a reasonable time following normal procedures.

I took immediate transfer to the mother ship in orbit around Sirenia. My crew had been briefed and they were waiting for me there. Less than three orbits after my arrival on board the mother ship, my crew and I took a shuttle to the planet and set up a ground base.

We settled into a routine. Every morning I picked up the latest reports on my way to my station. Usually by then everyone else on duty was wrapped in his or her own job and the privacy created in that elbow-to-elbow space by a preoccupation with the task at hand. From the first we had team cohesion, a pulling together, a sharing of the excitement and apprehension — the gut-tempered response of the professional facing the unknown. If there is fault in the outcome of our mission, it is not the fault of the team. They worked admirably under difficult conditions.

It is true that during the fifth week (relative date 11-007-27-XCCV) I had to severely reprimand my first assistant. I caught him on observation duty with his ears plugged, his unit flooded with the latest rhythm-blues. I could have cashiered him, but I'd worked with him before and knew him to be a bright, promising young linguist, usually conscientious. He explained that he had been observing several Sirenians at the edge of the forest some distance from the main village where we had been conducting our principal studies, when suddenly he felt overwhelmingly homesick and could no longer stand to listen to them. He added that he found Sirenian singing difficult listening even when he wasn't feeling homesick. Questioned, he admitted his explanation was inadequate and unprofessional, but he offered nothing else.

I stopped, not knowing exactly how to proceed. I wondered if making a final statement was the right thing to do. My own words sounded cold and distant. The investigator doodled on the tabletop, making col-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

orful and concentric swirls. Clearly uninterested, but well versed on how to play his role so as to leave his actions above reproach, he looked up and said, "Please, I remind you that being officially advised, you may proceed."

I thought about my team — those ten young men and women among the best and brightest gathered up from all over the galaxy, all hoping to make a name for themselves in the field of linguistics. I didn't see why this needed to ruin their careers even if my own was not salvageable. But those concerns did not really address the problem — the impressions — the surges of emotion that came like successively larger waves, overpowering and jolting through one's being. How could I describe what it was like to hear the Sirenians sing?

I knew what my first assistant meant, I told the investigator. I did not require a more detailed explanation from him because I knew what he was talking about. Looking back, I realize that even from the first, I sensed the Sirenians had mastered something more powerful than language.

One evening I checked out a BLIND (Bent Light Individual Noncontaminating Device). I can't blame the equipment. We had the latest invisible atmospheric minisubs used to make observations without disturbing the pristine quality of native cultural environments. I took my BLIND scooting along the surface, far into the woods, hoping to record the songs of animal keepers because I knew from past field experience that such workers frequently use repetitive communications, and repetitive sequences often provide keys to understanding the whole of a lingual system. I stopped in a pond at the foot of a rocky bluff where I could disguise my BLIND as a rock, matching the texture and color of the indigenous cliff behind me. Then I carefully set up, checking the one-way sound and visual permeability of my BLIND and readied my recording instruments, following my usual routine.

It was growing dark on that side of Sirenswelt. Nighttime reflections off the planet's ring lighted the treetops and open spaces, but the rest of the forest was in deep shadow. A breeze rippled the water near my BLIND, bending the reeds and sending the skimming insects skittering for cover.

I heard a song. I felt myself stiffen as I consciously tested the sounds, something like sticking a toe in water to test the temperature before taking a swim. I knew by then that some Sirenian songs could be disturbing like painful memories, but I found this song not unpleasant, and so I proceeded to check all the monitors, flipping through the views until I spotted the singer, a single male Sirenian sitting in the tall reeds at the edge of the pond.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

My subject was darker than most Sirenians and shorter. I couldn't be sure, but considered that he might be a juvenile. I searched the forest behind him for more natives, but he seemed to be alone.

He stared at the BLIND, trilling with one voice, purring with another. Then reaching forward, he brushed the surface of the water, dipped his hand in, and drank. With each swallow the tones of his song dropped pitch, warbled. A sense of his refreshment, cool and wet, moved my tongue over my upper lip, and I swear I could almost taste the water.

Then I felt the familiar sense of excitement that usually comes with the recognition of patterns in the precognitive stage of language decipherment — something like a tune that can't quite be recalled teasing the corners of my mind, sighing for recognition. That was strange because I hadn't heard enough Sirenian singing to expect to be able to narrow certain sounds to specific meanings, especially given the complexity of the songs. Sirenswelt — a planet slightly smaller, warmer, and wetter than Earth — had developed a dominant intelligent species of long-limbed, straight-backed singers: individually polyphonic. I had recorded as many as four simultaneous tones coming from a single individual. Large portions of the planet literally hummed with their voices; they never ceased singing.

My subject moved forward toward the BLIND. His tall, nearly hairless body swayed with the reeds, his song keeping rhythm with his forward movement. I had observed the Sirenians humming and purring even while they slept lying on thick reed mats under the high, leaf-thatched roofs of their huts. Even in sleep their limbs swayed gently as if dancing through their dreams like unconscious mimes.

I watched my subject step gingerly into the water, feeling for the muddy bottom. His song had become playful (I know that is not a precise or technical term, but I don't know how else to describe it). His song, as he entered the water, shifted. One voice skipped up a scale as if chasing the dominant melody, the third and fourth voices hummed guttural counterpoint.

Wading deeper into the pond, his hands reached for the BLIND. It seemed as though he knew something was there — and yet I checked my instruments, and all the readings indicated he couldn't be seeing anything but what would appear to him as a rock like all the other rocks in the cliff. When his hand brushed the BLIND's surface, textured to feel like a rock, his song struck staccato, resumed in Dorian mode. I watched him circle the entire perimeter of the BLIND, feeling, touching, worrying the surface, but always singing — though with an increased discordance that I found unnerving, like primal screaming battering at my consciousness.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He backed away, his song assuming a mellower tone. I watched him return to the shore, shake off the water, and after several backward glances, disappear into the woods.

I'm relating this incident because it's not part of the raw data. As the hum of his song faded into the night, I became aware of the even, mechanical vibration of my recorder. Glancing down, I encountered a blank log. I'd turned on the device but had never actually started it recording, I'd been so engaged by the singing. That kind of thing had happened before, and so I wondered if others on my team had experienced similar problems.

The next morning I called up the logs of the whole team, one after another. There were a great many incomplete entries. The more recent recordings were the worst. More startling was the fact that my team's entries resembled the entries of the previous team had been summarily discharged and that they were in danger of being similarly disciplined.

I called a staff meeting and confronted my team with their unprofessional work. The room became quiet, the usual banter ceasing from the moment I began the review. Only the shuffle of feet under the table punctuated the silence. I waited, letting the pressure of the moment build until I caught two or three of the team exchanging furtive glances with the second mate.

"Have you a thought on the subject?" I asked her.

Twon, a Monumorian, smoothed her hairy chin with the back of her hand. "I speak but not for myself only when I say the Sirenians have proved most difficult subjects."

"No one disputes that," I said, seeing the others nod agreement from where they sat around the table.

"Most difficult. Very interesting and potentially promising, but most difficult even in the simplest operation of listening, most difficult."

"Yes, yes," I told her. "The question is, Why? In appearance, the Sirenians are well within psychologically acceptable norms. Culturally, they're fairly standard nomadic clans. Even their voices are well within the humanoid range and not demonstrably abrasive. So why are we finding them so difficult?"

Silence.

With no one volunteering a ready answer, I continued. "The point is, we're all professionals here with something at stake individually and as a team. So I ask again, What is this difficulty we seem to be having?"

Twon glanced around the table as if gathering support, and then looked up. "Can we consider — perhaps only for the purpose of discussion, but consider nevertheless — the idea that Sirenian singing may have no linguistic meaning?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I'm open to any idea," I told her. "What are you trying to say?"

Twon smiled. "I will be pleased to explain what I understand, which is not all. I and we as a team together have observed that Sirenian songs may be singular or complex. That's characteristic of language. But I and we as a team together have also observed that the songs do not incorporate listening pauses. That's uncharacteristic of language as we know it. The Sirenians sing blending and balancing and building on each other's songs like musicians in a jam session, but I and we as a team together have observed times when the Sirenians sing in perfect unison. Only when they sing in perfect unison do subsequent actions suggest a transfer of information has taken place."

"Then we need to concentrate on those times when the Sirenians are singing in unison," I said. "Perhaps only one voice or scale is being used for language."

"I tried that," Hal, my first assistant, said. "That's when I could no longer stand to listen. When the Sirenians sing in unison, the emotional power of their songs increases geometrically somehow until the flood of emotional impressions becomes more than I can tolerate. I mean, haven't you felt it? I can't be the only one, can I?" He looked around the table at the other members of the team.

Reluctantly at first, and then with obvious relief, they met his gaze and one by one nodded agreement.

"But what about the obvious objection?" I said. "If the voices aren't used for communications, why do the Sirenians sing at all?"

"I don't know," Hal said. "Why do Earth birds sing or Latchize handyoks hum? Maybe they just enjoy it."

"No," I said, "I think that's too easy an answer."

We bantered a few ideas around.

"Maybe the Sirenians use sound to identify individuals the way some species use smell," someone suggested.

"But they have olfactory capabilities," someone else said.

"Could the sounds be used as some kind of social bonding mechanism?"

"Such a function would not require the complexity we've observed."

"They could be singing to block," the communications officer said, entering the debate for the first time.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I'm not sure, but it could be that when the Sirenians sing individually, their songs protect their thoughts like surrounding themselves with static. When they sing in unison, it could be like tuning in and letting their thoughts flow freely between the individuals singing together. It's possible that by manipulating the various tones and the various voices, an individual could censor with great sophistication what was transmitted and hat was kept private. The need to

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

block to protect the integrity of each individual mind would also explain why they sing all the time — even when they're sleeping. I mean, if we're going to consider possibilities, why not telepathy?" She shrugged.

I stiffened. Telepathy was a professional joke: Don't like the work? Say your subjects use brain waves, and go home. Galaxy-wide, even mute intelligences had found other means of communication more expedient, and yet the last team had come up with that same notion. I had thought they had simply used it as an excuse to quit. I asked, "Why would a species with polyphonic vocal capabilities resort to telepathy?"

The communications officer shrugged again. "I offer it only as an idea to consider, but as I said, the singing itself might be one of the best evidences."

I shook my head and said, "But even if that were true, the Sirenians still would have to have some convention, some signal — something akin to language that we ought to be able to decipher. Otherwise how do they sing in unison and manage to keep together?"

"That's easy," the first assistant said. "Once they join minds, they simply sing along telepathically."

"If we're right," Twon added, "we must also consider something far more serious, at least as it concerns ourselves."

"What's that?" I asked.

"If we're going to seriously consider telepathy, how are we going to enter that fact into our logs? I'm not anxious to become the laughingstock of the scientific community."

That sobered our discussion. We all knew what a darling telepathy had become in pseudoscientific circles —the kind of groups that went around gathering unsubstantiated testimonials and claiming loudly that the "authorities" were suppressing evidence of the phenomenon. We weren't anxious to join that company, but on the other hand, we clearly needed to consider telepathy, if only to refute it. So I took full responsibility. I advised my team to be honest and straightforward and to include all their observations and all their speculations in their logs. "We may have encountered the first telepathic species observed in the Galaxy," I told them. "If that's true, we'll go down in history, and the science of linguistics will never be the same. But before that can happen, keep in mind that we cannot leave this planet without some kind of observational evidence — something that will back up our logs and save our reputations. That means we can't afford any more sloppy entries. From this point forward, we're all going to have to work as if our careers depended on it, because they do."

The team reacted positively. Morale went up. They returned to their tasks with a new determined profes-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

sionalism, and so the work proceeded for the next several weeks.

Communication between intelligences is vastly complex and often startlingly subtle. Sometimes I was excited by the possibility of telepathy. Other times I expected as the work proceeded that something would come together, that some gesture, some slight movement of eye or lip, some pattern of tones would emerge as significant, and open the whole Sirenian language system. My only certainty was that aspects of my observations remained annoyingly unaccountable.

One day I set up near a stream where Sirenian mothers came to wash their babies. My first sighting was of three women coming down the path, singing raucously. Each held an infant against her hip, snug and dry under the rim of the wide reed hat that hung out over her shoulder like an umbrella. As they drew closer, I tried to separate some of the components of the music. Overall, the sounds were made up of medium- to high-pitched tonal successions embellished with trills almost like melodic laughter. There was a great deal of interaction among the singers, including repeated brief interludes of unison singing.

Two of the women continued to sing together, letting their contrapuntal tones skip up and down the scales. The third woman sat on the edge of the stream. She arched her legs in front of her with her heels dug unto the soft, muddy edge. Her song took on a wholly different quality. She hummed adding a medium-toned chortling undertone. Her baby wailed in two keys as she lifted him away from her hip and tugged at his clothes, removing them, but he quickly settled into a cooing song as she gently perched him on her legs, out of the mud, secure in the notch between her ankles and the tops of her feet. Then, while holding his wriggling nakedness in one hand, she dipped water from the stream with the other, rubbing gently as it flowed over his body. The baby began imitating the mother's sounds. Recognizing that as a sure sign of language development, I took note, concentrating on the interaction between the two. The baby reached for the mother's bracelet, a brightly dyed bangle of seeds and stones woven together with strands of hair. The mother's purring voice burst into melody. She bounced the bangle up and down until the baby caught it again. When he lost interest, she went back to purring and washing.

The monitors in my BLIND picked up only visuals and sound, but I swear I could smell the baby's newness. I could feel his soft, wet limbs as if they were wriggling against my own. It was those kinds of impressions that nearly always accompanied my observations and that I had no way to account for. The mother continued to

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

wash her baby. She cooed a soft song to her child and pointed in my direction. I usually dismissed those extensions of my observations as illusions — the workings of a too-active mind in need of rest, of time away from the pressures I was under.

The project dragged on with no break — no hard evidence of telepathy and no progress in deciphering any of the singing in terms of a conventional language. I began receiving inquiries from the head office wanting to know when we could wrap up the project. I stalled. Crew morale sagged. I began promising my team a vacation the moment we had something — anything. And still we continued day after day filling our logs with raw data — none of which was making any sense.

Then one day I watched a Sirenian woman set out her wares. Two clans had come together, and this particular woman attracted my attention because she seemed happily burdened with an excess of goods, including baskets, blankets, plaited ropes, bangles, and dried foodstuffs. She spread out her reed mats and unwrapped each bangle and sorted them by size and color into neat rows. Above the bangles she hung her baskets, first stringing them on a rope and then hanging them between two poles. She hung her blankets above her baskets, letting them fly in the breeze like a flutter of flags. All this was done to song, of course, the whole camp having taken up a busy rhythm.

The women of the other visiting clan came and examined her wares. They ahh-h-h-ed over her bangles, grunted over her blankets, and expressed satisfaction at the craftsmanship of her baskets — or at least that was the impression of meaning I took from their posturing and tenor of song. I was careful to note in my log that my interpretation was undoubtedly colored by my own cultural expectations of what those actions and song qualities might mean, but I felt reasonably sure I understood the exchange. Trade gestures are some of the most universal, Galaxy-wide.

Then one of the visiting women began to sing loudly. At first the woman displaying her wares kept singing her own song, seemingly ignoring the louder woman's song. The visiting woman brought two of her voices into play, feeling out and gradually affecting the music of the vendor's song until it lost its major quality and picked up bridging halftones. They both hit a minor chord in unison. Then continued singing together. The visiting woman gestured to the pile of goods. The vendor bowed. They embraced. Then the visiting woman gave the woman with the goods a plaited rope, and she returned a basket of dried fruit. Their songs parted, and each went her own way.

Clearly I'd witnessed a bartered

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

exchange of goods that was no more complicated than any other such transaction I'd seen on a dozen other worlds, except that the plaited rope, quickly constructed of materials easily obtained, seemed a poor exchange for an entire basket of fruits. I'd thought my subject a shrewder trader than that, unless, unless. . . .

I ordered the whole team to concentrate their observations on the plaited ropes: who had them, how they were exchanged, what kind of importance seemed to be attached to them, and so forth. In connection with that, two days later, Twon and Hal and I set up together near the center of one village, disguising our BLINDS as undergrowth to observe the weaving of the ropes.

We saw several Sirenians approach the fire and dry off the nighttime dampness. Then each took the bundle of sticks from a pouch they always carried and assembled a sitting platform just above the damp ground and settled on it. The singing was varied, incorporating everything from screeches and groans to barely audible susurrations. Besides that cacophony, most of the Sirenians stamped their feet and slapped their thighs. The din was more raucous than a trans-station crowd at departure time, but actually somewhat subdued, by Sirenian norms.

Hal and Twon decided to concentrate on two older females instructing a youngster in the art of cutting and drying the reeds, while I began to record the actual patterns, thinking they might represent some form of numerical tally.

We watched for some time. The Sirenians sat cross-legged on their platforms, their long, delicate fingers flying back and forth forming the ropes. Piles of variously dyed reeds lay in front of each weaver. They sang, not in unison, but in rhythm, a particular singer picking up a new reed on a particular beat. The reed weavings, like the songs, were individually dissimilar, although incorporating a common geometric style.

As the day wore on, more and more of our subjects left and returned with large reed mats decorated on one side with similar geometric designs. They stood the mats upright, forming a circle with the design on the inside. They hung a few fresh leaves on the outside and then went in and sat inside these enclosures alone or in pairs. This was behavior we had only recently observed, but we had assumed that the mats represented windbreaks, in as much as the seasons were changing.

With more and more of our subjects hidden behind these reed mats, we were about to give up for the day and go back to base, when suddenly a hot coal popped out of the fire onto the bare foot of one of the women Twon was watching. The woman jumped up, brushed it away, and let out a long wail, panting with one

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

voice, sobbing staccato with another. The other woman, next to her, grabbed a bowl of water and splashed it on the burn. An elderly man who was also nearby scooped up a handful of cool mud and began packing the burn. Everyone else picked up the hurt woman's wailing-panting song precisely on pitch, singing in perfect unison. Then, together, the entire group gradually shifted the song to a slower pace, adding enriched harmonics, until the burned woman broke away with a laughing whistle and resumed singing separately. She patted the man and woman on the front of their thighs, and they all went back to their own songs.

Twon turned to me. "I interpret that they dissipated the pain by joining minds and singing together. I interpret that because I could almost feel it myself."

I shook my head. I could hear what she was saying, but my attention was directed elsewhere.

She pressed. "You must have felt it too — the soothing, the cooling ease. Telepathy! It has to be telepathy!"

When I didn't say anything, Hal answered her. "I don't know. It might be in the sounds. The sounds were very descriptive."

"No," I said, and pointed to one monitor.

A reed mat enclosure had been knocked down by the burned woman. It lay flat, open, its geometric design facing us. I had focused the monitor on it, thinking it might illuminate the rope designs I'd been studying.

The design was embellished to create a geometrically balanced pattern that was typically Sirenian in the sense of the colors and materials used, yet the overall picture was alien. It represented the inside of a BLIND, the various darkened shapes woven into the mat placed and proportioned exactly as our knobs, dials, switches, and monitors.

"I and we together have contaminated the culture," Twon said, barely above a whisper.

"Yes, but how?" I asked, feeling the skin on the back of my neck tingle and tighten as my mind raced, considering every possibility — carelessness by my crew? Equipment malfunction? Sabotage by the mining companies? But I knew. I knew from the moment I saw that reed weaving what had happened. It all came back to me in a flash — that night when the young Sirenian waded through the pond and touched my BLIND — the mother who'd pointed directly at me, holding her baby up as if to see, and. . . .

I stopped recording, closed the soundsorbs, and shut down the monitors. In the darkened BLIND I struggled with the raw impressions, forcing them into an analytical framework. When I felt sure my voice would reveal no quiver, I said, "We're leaving the planet immediately."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The rest is a matter of record, but I would like to add to that record a word of warning.

According to the theory of Heimer and Zock, our Galactic Union of Social Systems, while recognizing a billion-plus vernaculars, is fundamentally based on the universal language of mathematics as expressed in our highly mechanized, computerated technology. I suggest that while the Sirenians may also have numerous dialects, they have based their society on the universal language of emotion as expressed in their music. Pack animals in some cultures can be called a hundred varied terms denoting sex, size, age, color, state of health, and even feats of speed and endurance. It is not unreasonable to expect that another culture might assign a thousand musical expressions to the varieties of mother-love, pride, pain, and solace. But for the Sirenians the singularity of their language extends beyond vocabulary. The songs only shield and control the more enhanced telepathic expression.

Even if we deciphered a portion of the musical vocabulary for which we have few equivalents, I doubt we could make meaningful contact with the Sirenians. We are physically handicapped, having only one voice, and while we might try to duplicate the additional sounds mechanically, we would lose a great deal, if not all, in the translation, lacking as we do the capability to add our own telepathic enhancement.

Theoretically the Sirenians could learn to speak our language, but why would they want to? Surely they sense our suppressed expression with the same repugnance as we experience their sea of sensation. Used to swift and subtle interplay of emotion as they are, it would make as much sense for them to squash all that into some clumsy lingual convention as for us to try to paddle our spaceships with an oar.

In light of all that, perhaps we should consider that if the Sirenians are as sophisticated telepathically as I am suggesting, they may have a far wider range of mental capabilities than those we've observed to date. The Sirenians are a gentle, imitative people. So far we've only piqued their curiosity, but having felt the power of their gentle probes, I would not want to experience any of their irritation.

Above all I don't recommend that we hurry the preliminary science studies and try to mine Sirenia from enclosed bases. The Sirenians are not fooled by our BLINDS. All the time we thought we were observing them, they were observing us. We don't sing, so we don't block.

Bethuan, The Diogian investigator, snorted. He immediately regretted making that noisy indiscretion, the only lapse in his professional de-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

meanor he'd allowed himself in the whole of the proceeding, but it did express his feelings. He knew fieldwork was tough, lonely, and exhausting. Not everyone could cut it.

The young linguist under his examination had probably been advanced too quickly — given too much responsibility too fast — and now the Service was not only losing her and all the training the Service had invested in her, but her crew as well, ten similarly trained individuals. But it couldn't be helped. Science was built on exacting principles. The member of the Service who could not see past the multiplicity of surface manifestations to focus on the underlying universal structures could only confuse and impede progress. Minds once contaminated with doubts concerning that dictum could not be tolerated. She'd given him no choice with the yarn she'd spun. Surely she hadn't thought he could be fooled by such a boogie story — "Watch out! They're watching us." Besides, if he let her get away with that, it'd be the ruin of his own career.

"It's just not working. He's *teaching* me *primate speech."*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

TIME IS OUT OF JOINT

It's a hard life being time-bound, but I come by it honestly. When I was a boy, I had to be downstairs to deliver the papers for my father's candy store, and that had to be done *on time,* because the customers had to get their papers before they left for work.

What's more, I had to be in school *on time,* or I would be marked "tardy," and after a while that would be reported to my parents. My mother, being European, and therefore under the peculair impression that crime ought to be punished, would surely whop me, and with no light hand, either.

And then, of course, radio programs began *on the minute* and who wanted to miss them.

So it was a golden day for me when I was given my first wrist-watch and came to be the master of time. I could now see what time it was by a mere glance at my left wrist, and that meant I would never be late again. Or, at least if I were, I would *know* first, that I was going to be late, and, eventually, that I *was* late.

It is now a long, long time since my first watch, and I have never been without one since. I don't mean I have always had one somewhere around. I mean I have always had one *on my wrist.* Almost always. I remove it, reluctantly in order to take a shower, and again when I go to sleep (in which case I always have a clock on the night-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

stand, with an illuminated dial, so that any time my eyes open I know immediately what time it is).

When I am wearing my watch, I doubt that five minutes ever pass without my casting a quick glance at my wrist, for no purpose other than to know what time it is. I may not need to know the time; that knowledge may serve no conceivable purpose, but that doesn't matter. I must know the time.

In my younger days, I remember that this often faced me with an embarrassing dilemma. There I would be, patting a nice young lady on the head, or pinching her cheek (or whatever it might be that I was doing —it's hard to remember that far back), and then that mad desire to know the time would sweep over me. I knew very well that to glance at my watch would be interpreted by the young woman in only one way — that I was bored, and anxious to be rid of her. This would (for some reason) fill her with rage, and the proceedings might well come to an end. I also knew very well that no matter how unobtrusively I looked at my watch, nor how cleverly I masked the act ("Is that a scratch on my wrist?") she would know.

I was at times reduced to the craven expedient of trying to alter the rules of the game at the beginning: "Look, baby doll, I have this nervous twitch that makes me look at my wrist every five minutes. It doesn't mean anything."

"Really?" she would be very likely to answer. "Well, just put your watch on that chest of drawers and turn the dial away from you."

Let me tell you that just about killed the fun, almost.

In any case, let's talk about time.

In the good old days before everyone had a watch that was accurate enough to tell time to the minute, if not the second, people nevertheless managed to get along. There was usually a clock (of indifferent accuracy) in the church spire, the highest point in town, so that everyone might see it. The hours were rung on the church bells so that people might hear the time if they happened to be looking in the wrong direction or if something blocked their view. That is why we have our word "clock," from the French word "cloche," which means "bell."

Thus, when Falstaff in "King Henry IV, Part One," brags falsely about having killed the valiant Hotspur at the Battle of Shrewsbury, he says they "fought a long hour by Shrewsbury clock."

People who lived in rural areas didn't have even a town clock to go by.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

In that case, they used the clocks of heaven. Thus, earlier in the same play, a workman is fretful over the lateness of the night. He says: "An [if] it be not four by the day [4 A.M.], I'll be hanged. Charles' Wain [the Big Dipper] is over the new chimney, and yet our horse not packed."

The stars travel regularly across the sky, and, from their position and the season of the year, someone like the workman just mentioned can make a rough estimate of the time.

If you point directly upward, you will point to the highest part of the sky, relative to yourself, or the "zenith" (from an Arabic word meaning "overhead". If an imaginary line is drawn north and south through the zenith, it divides the sky into two equal halves between the rising point of a heavenly object and its setting point. That north-south line through the zenith is called the "meridian," from a Latin word meaning "mid-day."

The reason for that word is that in passing from east to west, from rising to setting, a heavenly body crosses the meridian half-way on its journey, so that the Sun, for instance, crosses it at mid-day. Heavenly bodies don't necessarily pass through the zenith in crossing the meridian. Generally, they pass north or south of the zenith. The Sun and Moon, viewed from the North Temperate zone, always pass south of the zenith. Nevertheless, a heavenly body crossing the meridian anywhere does so half-way in its journey across the sky.

If we were to note the moment when a particular star crossed the meridian on a particular night, and when it crossed it again on the next night, and then on the next and so on, and do so with a good clock, we would find that the intervals were equal in length to a high degree of accuracy. This is not surprising since the passage of the stars across the sky is actually a reflection of the rotation of the earth on its axis, and that rotation proceeds at a constant rate.

You might wonder, by the way, why we would take the trouble to measure the intervals between the times of crossing of the meridian, when the meridian is an imaginary line that takes some trouble to set up. Why not measure the intervals between star-rise and star-rise, or between star-set and star-set?

For one thing, the horizon on land is broken and uneven and therefore hard to observe. Even at sea where the horizon is smooth, there is usually a haze, and, even if there wasn't, the atmospheric absorption and refraction of light would confuse the issue. Objects are more easily and accurately observed the higher they are in the sky and, therefore, most easily and accurately observed when they cross the meridian.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The interval between the crossing of the meridian by a star on one night and then on the next is the "sidereal day." ("Sidereal" is from the Latin word for "constellation" or "star.") It is the length of a complete rotation of the Earth relative to the stars, that is, to the Universe generally.

The sidereal day is of interest to astronomers but not to the population generally. Ordinary people are asleep during the night, and even if they are awake, the positions and movements of the stars are of little interest to them.

People, however, are awake during the day, and during the day it is impossible not to be aware of the position and movement of the Sun. On its changing depends all sorts of activities, and, therefore, the moment at which the Sun crosses the meridian is important indeed to everyone.

Of course, one can't really watch the Sun cross the sky without going blind, but no one has to. The sun produces shadows that can be observed quite easily and comfortably, and those shadows are a perfect key to the movements of the Sun.

Suppose you thrust a pole firmly into the ground. At sunrise, that pole will cast a long shadow westward. As the sun climbs in the sky, the shadow will shorten and shorten and (if you are in the north temperate zone) will swing around northward. The shadow passes the pole to the north, being relatively short then, and then begins to stretch out longer and longer eastward until sunset.

Suppose you mark out the shadows of the pole at sunrise and at sunset as two furrows in the ground, and bisect the angle they form, dividing it in two. This is not difficult to do. In that case, it will be found that the line that serves as the bisector will extend exactly north and south. When the shadow falls on that line, the Sun is crossing the meridian and it is exactly midday.

Such a pole is called a "gnomon" (the "g" is silent) from a Greek word meaning "know," since it gives us knowledge concerning the time of day.

The ancients learned to set up a gnomon in a bowl set on a pedestal. The gnomon was placed at an appropriate angle toward the north so that the shadow fell on the rim of the bowl and travelled along that rim from west to east. The distance between the sunrise shadow and the sunset shadow was marked off into twelve parts, marking twelve equal divisions of the day, and thus you had a sundial.

Why twelve? This was a fashion begun by the Sumerians perhaps as early as 3000 B.C. They had not yet worked out a good system of dealing

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

with fractions so they preferred to use numbers that were least likely to leave fractions when broken into smaller parts. Twelve can be evenly divided by 2, 3, 4, and 6 and was useful therefore.

Each division is called an "hour" (from a Greek word meaning "time of day").

Originally, sunrise marked the zero point of measuring the hours, so that the "first hour" was the first twelfth of daylight, the "second" hour the second twelfth, and so on. Hence, when the Bible speaks of the "eleventh hour," it doesn't mean either 11 A.M. or 11 P.M., but the final twelfth of daylight; that is, the last hour of daylight before the "twelfth hour," which was sunset.

The phrase "noon" is a distortion of the Greek word for "nine" and meant the "ninth" hour," which began when the daylight was three-fourths done. It meant, in other words, mid-afternoon. Perhaps it was associated with mealtime, and when the chief meal of the day shifted to midday, the association with food was stronger than the association with nine, so that noon became midday, or the "sixth hour." For that reason we now speak of "forenoon" and "afternoon," or, if we like to speak Latin, we can say "antemeridian" (A.M.) or "postmeridian" (P.M.).

Naturally, since the daylight was divided into twelve hours, the night was, too.

As we all know, for half the year the days grow longer and the nights shorter, while for the other half the days grow shorter and the nights longer. This is true everywhere but at the equator, and the farther one travels from the equator in either direction, the more marked the changes are.

Where the sundial is the method of marking the hours, the individual hours grow longer by day and shorter by night, or vice versa, depending on the time of year.

However, sundials were not the only time-keeping mechanisms. They had their shortcomings. They didn't work on cloudy days, and while this did not matter in the almost cloudless climate of Egypt, where the sundial may have been invented, it was a drawback in more atmospherically turbulent regions. Then, too, even in Egypt, sundials didn't work at night.

So people sought other ways of telling time. They considered processes that continued at a slow but apparently constant rate and tried to synchronize them with the sundial.

For instance, candles of a given height and thickness could be manufactured and allowed to burn. Marks could then be made on a second

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

candle, that was not burning, scoring the places reached by the burning candle at the end of successive hours. Similar candles are all marked this way, and from then on the hours can be followed at night by burning candles. In the same way, periods of time can be marked by the sifting of sand or the dripping of water through small apertures.

Such portable devices, if they must measure hours that grow longer and shorter with the seasons, become impractically complicated. It proved much simpler to consider the hours to be of constant length through the day and night, as well as throughout the year. Each hour was a length of time equal to 1/24th of a day, and this practice has continued to the present.

There is a question of when the day starts. It seems very natural to begin the day at sunrise, or else, to end the day at sunset and begin a new day at that time.

The peoples of southwestern Asia, including the Jews, began the day at sunset, and this habit continues in the Jewish religious calendar right down to the present. Thus, the Jewish Sabbath (usually considered to fall on Saturday) actually begins at sunset on Friday.

There is even a fossil remnant of that view in Christian life. We speak of Halloween (All-Hallows Day evening), Christmas Eve, and New Years Eve. These were not originally the evening *before* the holiday They were the first part of the holiday itself that began, originally, at sunset of the previous evening.

For astronomers, however, the imperfections of considering the intervals between sunrises or between sunsets were irritating. The moment of sunrise or sunset varied with the nature of the horizon. It took the sun a little extra time to rise above a hill on the eastern horizon, and it set a little sooner behind a hill on the western horizon. Besides clouds and haze often obscured the horizon at the crucial moment. Then, too, as the days grew shorter, sunrise takes place a little later each morning and sunset a little sooner, while when the days grew longer, the reverse is true. In either case, the interval from sunrise to sunrise, or from sunset to sunset, is longer at some times than others.

The exact time of the meridian passage of the Sun is a lot easier to measure than that of either sunrise or sunset. What's more, the interval between is constant the year round, for as days shorten or lengthen, they shorten or lengthen at both ends equally, leaving the middle in place.

Therefore, the time interval marking the "solar day" (one complete

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

rotation of the Earth relative to the Sun) is best measured from noon to noon or from midnight to midnight. The choice fell upon midnight because that meant the day changed from one to the next when everyone was sleeping (or should have been) and not in the middle of the active day, something that would upset business records and make them more complicated.

It would make sense then to count the hours from 1 to 24, and this is done under some conditions and in some places. However, the old, old habit of two periods of twelve hours each is too firm to shake off altogether. We usually count, therefore, from 1 A.M. to 12 noon, then from 1 P.M. to 12 midnight.

In this way, we no longer count twelve hours of daylight and twelve hours of night. Instead, both ranges of twelve hours are partly daylight and partly night. Furthermore, "noon," which originally meant the ninth hour of daylight, and then came to mean the sixth hour, is now number twelve. Talk about the time being out of joint.

Until the middle of the seventeenth century, there were no clocks capable of measuring small divisions of the hour. Nevertheless, the habit was established of dividing each hour into sixty minutes, and each minute into sixty seconds. This, too, began with the Sumerians, who applied this system to the division of each degree of arc into sixty minutes of arc and each minute into sixty seconds of arc. The number sixty was chosen, like the number twelve, because of the convenience of its having many divisors. The number sixty is divided evenly by 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 10, 12, 15, 20, and 30.

The solar day is defined as being 24 hours long; that is 24 hours, 0 minutes, 0 seconds. The sidereal day, which I mentioned earlier in this essay, is not quite so long. Actually, it is 23 hours, 56 minutes, 4 seconds long. The difference is 3 minutes, 56 seconds.

Why should the sidereal day be shorter than the solar day by that queer amount? When the Earth completes one turn, it completes one turn whether you're marking it by the stars or the Sun, doesn't it?

The answer is, no! It makes a difference.

You see, the Earth is not only rotating about its axis. It is also revolving about the Sun.

As the earth moves in its journey about the Sun, the stars are not measurably affected. They are so far away that the Earth's orbit about the Sun, which is 186 million miles across and seems to us to be enormous, is to the distant stars, to all intents and purposes, a point. There-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

fore, the Earth might be viewed as rotating on its axis, but to be otherwise stationary with respect to the stars.

The Sun is much closer to us than the stars are, however, and so it seems to shift position against the stars as Earth moves about it.

At a given time, we see the Sun against the stars in a certain portion of the sky. (The stars in the immediate neighborhood of the Sun cannot ordinarily be seen, of course, but we see the stars to its west just before sunrise and those to its east just after sunset; and if we know the sky well, we will know the stars in between which are in the immediate neighborhood of the Sun.)

Half a year later, we are on the other side of the Sun and, therefore, see it against the stars in the opposite side of the sky. Another half year and we are back where we were and the Sun is back where it was. In other words, the Sun seems to make a complete circuit of the sky in one year, or 365.2422 solar days.

That means that when the Earth turns on its axis once with respect to the stars, the Sun has moved a trifle eastward against the stars and the Earth must continue to turn for 3 minutes and 56 seconds to catch up with it. Each day it has to make that small extra bit of turn to catch up with the Sun, and after a whole year, Earth has made a complete additional turn about its axis in order to keep up with a Sun which has made a complete turn about the sky.

Therefore, while a year consists of 365.2422 solar days, it consists of 366.2422 sidereal days. The difference of three minutes and 56 seconds between a solar day and a sidereal day is 1/366.2422 of a year.

The sidereal day is the true period of Earth's rotation relative to the Universe in general, but there is no use arguing that point to anyone but astronomers. The people of Earth are tied to the sun, and to us what counts is when the Sun (not Sirius, or the Galactic center, or some distant quasar) crosses the meridian. For that reason, if you ask anyone how long it takes the Earth to turn on its axis, you will be told it takes 24 hours. If you try to insist that it takes 23 hours 56 minutes and 4 seconds, you'll very likely be hit with a brick.

Yet despite everything I've said, the interval from noon to noon is not exactly 24 hours. It is usually a little bit less or a little bit more than that. There are two reasons for this.

In the first place, the Earth does not travel about the Sun in a perfect circle. If it did, it would move always at the same speed, but it doesn't.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The orbit is slightly elliptical, so that for half the year the Earth is a bit closer than average to the Sun and moves about it at a speed a bit higher than average. During the other half, it is a bit farther than average from the Sun and moves about it at a speed a bit lower than average.

Standing on Earth's surface, we see this terrestrial motion reflected in the apparent eastward motion of the Sun against the stars. For half the year, this apparent motion is faster than average. That means that as Earth's rotation carries the Sun from east to west against the sky, its additional motion eastward because of its higher speed brings it to the meridian point a little later than it would have gotten there if Earth had a circular orbit.

Then the Sun begins to slow its apparent motion, and its gain decreases and becomes a loss. Eventually, the loss decreases and becomes a gain. One can plot the time the Sun crosses the meridian from day to day. There is a small bulge upward and a small bulge downward, but at the end of the year things are right where they are supposed to be. The difference is only a matter of a few minutes at the worst.

A second cause of irregularity rests with the fact that the Earth's axis is tipped by 23.5 degrees to the plane of its revolution about the Sun. At the equinoxes (March 20 and September 23), the Sun's apparent motion across the sky cuts the equator at an angle and it moves more slowly from west to east. At the solstices (June 21 and December 21) it moves parallel to the equator and at a distance from it and seems to move more rapidly. In between the equinoxes and the solstices, the apparent motion slows or hastens. Again there is a bulge and a dip in the course of the year, but these even out by the end of the year.

If you add the two effects together, you have what is called "the equation of time."

Each of the two individual effects is symmetrical, with the highest part of the bulge and the lowest part of the dip equal in size and coming just six months apart. However the two effects are not equal in size to each other and don't come at the same time of the year. The equation of time, which is the sum of the two, is therefore asymmetric. It has two bulges upward in the course of the year and two bulges downward and the bulges are of different size.

If we start at the beginning of the year, the Sun is crossing the meridian a little late. This discrepancy increases and reaches a peak on February 12, when it is a little over 14 minutes late. The Sun then begins catching up and is on time on April 14. It then moves ahead and is 8

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

minutes early on May 20. It is on time again on June 20 and falls behind so that by August 4 it is 6 minutes late. On August 29 it is on time again then moves ahead until it is a little over 16 minutes early on November 3. It then slows up, is on time again on December 20 and continues falling back to begin the process all over again with the new year.

This unevenness in solar motion, involving never more than a quarter of an hour discrepancy, doesn't affect the ordinary person, but it would be one royal pain in the neck for clockmakers if they tried to devise a timepiece that kept exact time with the actual motion of the Sun through the year.

Instead, timekeepers pretend that there is a Sun crossing the meridian every day at the same time, as there would be if Earth's orbit were circular and its axis were not tipped. This is called the "mean Sun," where "mean" from the Latin "median," has the meaning of "average."

There is, therefore, "solar time," the time marked off by a sundial, and "mean solar time," in which the interval from noon to noon is always exactly 24 hours, whatever the sundial says.

You can mark out the position of the real Sun east and west of the mean Sun, east when it is fast and west when it is slow. At the same time, you can mark out the position of the real Sun north and south of the equator (a position that varies in the course of the year due to the tilting of the axis).

The result is an asymmetric "figure eight," with the southern loop longer and wider than the northern loop (reflecting the asymmetry of the equation of time).

This asymmetric figure eight is called an "analemma," from a Latin word for "sundial," since it can be obtained in part from a comparison of the sundial noon with the clock noon. On large globes, it is placed in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, possibly because the region is empty and seems to need ornament. Certainly I see no use for it, though I had to study it carefully in the process of writing this essay.

Two more items before I close. We can't use mean solar time without still further modification.

Suppose each community adjusts its noon to when the mean Sun crosses the meridian of some central point in that community. That would be "local mean time." Railroads, however, found it impossible to prepare timetables when each community had its own time. Therefore, the notion of "standard time" arose, in which fixed bands of Earth's surface were assigned the same time regardless of the precise local mean time (see "The Times of Our Lives," F & SF, May 1967).

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Finally, it turns out that as the days grow long, people sleep through several hours of sunshine in the morning, and then stay up after sunset and consume energy in order to light hours of darkness. If people got up earlier in the summer half of the year and went to bed earlier, some of that energy would be saved.

Can you imagine the American government ordering everyone to wake up an hour earlier and go to bed an hour earlier just to save desperately needed energy? Why, the American people in their proud independence and individuality would rise as one person and denounce those Washington bureaucrats who tried to tell them when to rise in the morning.

So the government sets up "daylight-saving time" and shoves the clock an hour ahead. When it now says 7 A.M., it's really 6 A.M. The clock is lying and everyone knows the clock is lying. However—

While Americans would scorn to be slaves of the government, they are pathetically eager to be slaves to the clock. An earnest, well-meaning government may tell them to get up at 6 A.M. instead of 7 A.M. and get a Bronx cheer in return, but when a lying *clock* tells them to do so, up they get like good little boys and girls.

I'll leave it to you to work out the moral of the story.

Coming soon

Next month: In our October 1985 issue we published James Tiptree's "The Only Neat Thing To Do," which proved even more popular than most of that author's well received work. Next month we feature "Good Night, Sweethearts" a brand new tale with the same background, the Great North Rift.

Also on hand next month or soon after that: new tales from Ron Goulart, Felix Gotschalk, Robert F. Young, Damon Knight and many others. The March issue is on sale January 30.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Russell Griffin wrote "In Hector's Grave," (September 1985). His new story, he writes, "may have been inspired by a visit with my son to our local model railroad store followed by a sumptuous fast-food dinner where I began musing on how long it would be before the EPA banned cars entirely. . ."

The Road King

BY
RUSSELL GRIFFIN

The two strangers behind Hawthorne had unnerved him, but rush hour was on and the air pulsed with the whine of engines and the hollow smell of ozone. He had to concentrate. He was so close — this time he'd really show them. He was well past the industrial congestion, almost to Exit 10, where the interstate merged with the Beltway. His eyes burned from squinting, and he allowed himself an instant's glance away from the winding gray tape of highway. To his right were rolling brown hills of lichen and dried shrub, to his left the blue plate of bay along whose far rim the highway curved among the pristine smokestacks, then swung north along the coast.

Again his eye caught the two strangers watching intently from the crowd, then back to the highway where his tandem-axle GMC Astro tractor was toiling up the steep grade toward the Beltway interchange with Bill Vernon's kitbashed depressed-center trailer behind.

He almost laughed. It was too easy. This far ahead of traffic, nothing but drones to fight, no challenge till the hairpin out on Interstate 80.

He decided to swing off and cool his motor till the action caught up with him. He cut back his rheostat and eased his rig off the highway into the John Allen Rest Area — still unfinished, swatches of white plaster and raw pine visible amid the trees. Carefully he picked his way among the parked cars behind Howard Johnson's, just kissing a static dummy semi with the sides of his rear four.

But he'd miscalculated — again. The sudden angry buzz of motors told him the hair ball of congestion was closer than he'd thought. Already

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

they were freewheeling into the foot of the grade to get as far as possible before they had to downshift and pull. He cranked his rheostat full right, impatient with the momentum throttle's resistor soaking up the power surge to dole out prototypically slow acceleration. Still, he was doing close to scale fifty by the time he shot down the access ramp's narrowing throat past the Ho-Jo picnic area, squealing in just ahead of Frye's '75 Bluebird "all-American" school bus.

He saw Frye's lips form a soundless curse as he swerved to avoid the Astro. Well, Frye would just have to start paying more attention to him from now on. The operators' faces were hard with concentration on the knife-edge between catastrophe and making time.

He felt the eyes of the two strangers boring into the soft spot between his shoulder blades, but he was pushing eighty-five now on the downgrade toward the Beltway onramp, shifting lanes again and again for the huge, tail-swiping joy of it, a brontosaurus in full career. He saw the apprehension on Vernon's stupid, freckled face, could almost count the hours rebuilding that trailer in the lines of his forehead. The hell with you, Bill Vernon, he thought, swerving ever so slightly to make the trailer thrash behind him. If you can't stand the heat. . . .

And then that moron Victor Milikowski's two-axle '54 Mack flatbed stake truck shot out of the Beltway to challenge him for the lead. For a second the overheads flickered and it looked like the whole thing was going to end before powerout anyway, but they held, burned brown to orange, then yellow, as the two trucks seesawed down the incline hell-bent on destruction and into the bend that Donleavy had designed to force drivers to brake.

Then Milikowski risked a jackknife to make Hawthorne drop back, cut it too fine, tacked him on the fender, locked bumpers like a Siamese twin as the impact sent both sideways across the copper contacts of lanes four and five — The GMC spinning away to plow into two drone cars and carry them through the balsa guardrails plummeting through an arc toward the ocean, while the '54 flatbed rammed into a bridge abutment in a shower of plaster dust. Only Frye's skill with the momentum brake kept his Bluebird out of the pileup.

And then the moment they always dreaded: the shoulder-flinching *crack-crack-crack* as the drones and Astro hit the rigid ocean waves in a spray of varnished plaster chips. The Astro skidded across the bay and off the edge of the table. It hit the floor with a sickening *thunk*.

"You've done it this time, dork," Frye laughed.

"Shit," Hawthorne said, laying his controller across the highway.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Couldn't one of you ten-wheel charlies have grabbed it before it went off the layout?"

The truck had landed near Vernon's feet. He bent down and scooped it up, cradling it in his palms like a wounded sparrow. The paint was scraped from the side, the drive axle hopelessly bent, and one rear tire gone for good under the table. Wordlessly he unhitched his trailer from the Astro.

"If you hadn't wrecked your own cab last week, you could have hauled it yourself and left me out of it," Hawthorne said defensively, snatching his cab back. He could always get away with bullying Vernon. "Look at my Astro. A hundred-dollar kit ruined."

"Stop acting like a baby," Milikowski said. "It's not life and death, for Chrissake. It's a hobby." He looked down at the smashed lead grillwork of his '54 flatbed.

"You're the one caused it, cutting in like that," Hawthorne said. "I could have *won.*"

"You?" Milikowski sneered.

Hawthorne wilted. He'd never meant to challenge Milikowski.

"You're both going to have to replaster the bay," the Road Kings' club secretary said, gingerly running his fingers over the white gouges in the varnished ocean. "And paint it. You know the rules." He retrieved the two club drones from the beach. "Sometimes, Hawthorne, I wonder why we let you in."

"Screw all of you," Hawthorne said. He'd almost won, and people still acted like he was so many scale bolts on a model grease pan — too small to notice.

"That was quite a piece of driving," said a voice behind him.

Gratefully, Hawthorne turned to see one of the strangers, a black man of medium height with a broad nose and liquid brown eyes, face mottled with odd, wavy scars and patches of pale, dead skin. He wore one of those reproduction Peterbilt caps and a blue jumpsuit covered with what looked like black grease smudges, except they couldn't be. "Like seeing the good old days come to life," he added.

"Before free enterprise went down the shitcan," said the other stranger with a thin-lipped, reptilian smile. He was a little taller, with a flat, grub-white face rimmed by a mustacheless Abe Lincoln beard and bisected by the shadow of the rafter under the bare light bulb. There was something about him that set Hawthorne's teeth on edge, like bad grapefruit juice.

"You model truckers, too?" Hawthorne asked. "From another club?"

The two strangers exchanged a quick glance.

"Something like that," the first one smiled. "But say, what about a drink at the fastfood down the street? There's just time before powerout."

Hawthorne looked from one to the other. Hell, it wasn't like Jess and the kid were waiting for him back at

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the apartment anymore. The thought of sitting in that windowless dark with the gypsum board exhaling mildew was too depressing. And these guys at least noticed him. "O.K., why not?"

"There you go," said the first one, leading the way out. "Name's Lafferty, by the way."

"Pleased to meet you." Hawthorne noticed that Lafferty walked by shifting his whole body weight to swing each leg forward in a stiff sideways arc; at the stairs, he had to lift each dead thigh up one step at a time. Artificial legs, Hawthorne realized.

Outside, Vernon was slipping the spring clip on his pant leg to keep his cuff out of his bicycle sprocket. Milikowski and a couple of friends were walking briskly down the street toward the nearest Rapid stop, whispering and laughing. They didn't say good night. A member seven years — and the only guy who'd ever had Hawthorne over to his apartment was Vernon, and everybody knew Vernon was a complete loser. How had Jess put it before she left? He'd spent time squinting at tiny things, he'd shrunk to match them.

With a slam, the club secretary pushed the door shut behind them. The bolt clicked into place.

"Funny, I don't remember seeing you around," Hawthorne said. "I go to all the meets and thruwayana swaps."

"Mr. Coffin and I model in a larger scale," Lafferty smiled again.

Ka-ching, ka-ching, chattered the bell on Vernon's bicycle as he pedaled past. "See you next Wednesday, good buddy."

"Yeah," Hawthorne said. "Ten-four." He blushed at affecting the old lingo in front of newcomers.

The streetlamps and house lights on the opposite side of the street flickered, browned, burned yellow again, trembled, and finally snapped out, hurrying them on around cracked tilted squares of sidewalk, clumps of grass, debris. Between the buildings peeked a bit of thruway still towering on its supports like a giant mushroom, somehow passed over by scavengers looking for materials to patch their crumbling buildings or reinforce their shanties.

"Imagine that island of concrete linked to a thousand others, stretching as far as you could see in every direction," Lafferty said. "Crawling with trucks, cars, buses — your club layout come to life."

Hawthorne grinned. "Those were the days, huh? And those old truckers — kings of the road. Talk about sailors with a girl in every port — why, ladies used to throw themselves at them. Can't you see yourself on the CB making a date with some lady for the parking lot at the next truck stop? Or maybe just sitting with a hot cup of java in some foreign city like Moline or Little Rock. I mean, they knew how to live, real *heroes.*"

"Not like today," Coffin grunted

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

in his gravelly voice. "Everything down the shitcan."

"Ask my ex-wife," Hawthorne agreed.

They made the fastfood in plenty of time. It was still bright, a few diners at the corners. Hawthorne slid into a booth, set the battered remains of his Astro on the table between them.

"McMartinis or McManhattans?" asked Lafferty.

"McManhattan for me, if it's O.K.," Hawthorne said.

Lafferty looked expectantly toward Coffin as though for money, but Coffin slid wordlessly onto the bench opposite Hawthorne, and Lafferty went off digging into his own rear pocket. Hawthorne let his eyes drift to the wallscreen, where the third square from the right was carrying a commercial. Hawthorne liked commercials. This one had some perky little piece and one of those impossibly handsome guys with a solid white band instead of separate teeth.

Whew, what did you have for supper, the actress chirped, *beans?*

"You know what my old man would have said about that ad?" Hawthorne said. He'd have said, 'Jack, things have really gotten out of hand.'"

"They put anything on the wall these days," the taciturn man said.

"That was his way of talking about things like good taste, morals. Things have really gotten out of hand."

"Down the shitcan."

Lafferty returned with a tray of three yellow paper cups decorated with the grinning face of a red-haired clown. "McMartini to you, Mr. Coffin," he said, distributing the cups. McManhattan for our trucker." He lifted his cup. "Here's to some fine driving."

"Down the can," said the man. "It all ends up in the sewer."

Hawthorne drank his at a gulp — the usual watery fastfood cocktail, just enough to bring a flush to his cheeks — and tipped his head way back to roll the reconstituted cherry into his mouth. Then he put the paper cup down, careful not to look too much like he was waiting for another round.

"You drove like you've had some experience with the big ones," Lafferty said.

"You mean in a museum or something?" Hawthorne looked into his empty cup, but nobody noticed.

"No, for real."

Should he risk a little banter with these new friends, he wondered. "You invent a time machine or something?"

Coffin peered at him from under lidded eyes, scratching his chin through his beard. "You don't need a time machine. Just a little ingenuity."

Hawthorne drew his ruined truck protectively to his own side of the table. "If you don't mind breaking the law."

"You *like* the state having a monopoly on transportation?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"They say it keeps down pollution," Hawthorne ventured.

"All it keeps down is the likes of us," Coffin said. "Those so-called environmentalists were Commie stooges. Look where it got us. No way to travel except Railnet, air's still filthy, and the economy's down the—"

Hawthorne pulled his head into his shoulders like a turtle. "Only truck I even heard about in years was that smuggler got ambushed by some other cryptos. They stopped it with nets, blew the poor bastard full of holes."

"It wasn't other cryptos, it was the cops," Lafferty corrected. "And the driver was burned, that's all."

Hawthorne glanced at the ripples of pale scar tissue across Lafferty's dark face. "Exactly which of the bigger scales do you model in?" he asked.

Lafferty smiled, pushed his paper cup an arm's length away. "Twelve inches to the foot."

Hawthorne looked from Lafferty to the other man and back. "You mean—?"

Coffin held up his hand. "This isn't the place. But maybe Mr. Hawthorne might like to see something interesting."

Hawthorne looked at his cup, empty as his apartment. He was a little scared, but he was damned if Jess could ever again accuse him of avoiding the big stuff. "O.K., why not?"

They caught the next Rapid car, Coffin's beard-rimmed white face ghastly under the green lights, shadows waxing and waning along the ridges and craters of Lafferty's scars as they rocked slowly on. They got off at the end of the line, just a thicket of saplings that marked the border between what had been a commercial district and suburbia. Nowadays the abandoned warehouses were occupied by squatters, but suburbia, as far as anybody knew, was deserted but for passing hoboes.

"Seems to me this is near where my old man used to hunt after the ducks started to come back. He'd sit out in the bulrushes with these little wooden duck decoys he carved to make the real ducks think it was safe."

"Get many?" Lafferty asked, gamely swinging his fiberglass legs around the matted husk of what might have been a dog carcass.

"Not really. His decoys looked like steam irons with heads. 'Used to be able to buy good ones,' my old man used to say. 'Before things got out of hand.' He wasn't much of a modeler, you see. He didn't have the eye."

"Right up ahead," Coffin said, pointing across the tall roadside grass toward a long, low shed. Some of its windows had been painted black, others boarded up.

Coffin had to wrestle with the padlock, but at last it came free and he kicked the door inward. "Quick, before anybody gets a look," he muttered. Lafferty nudged Hawthorne in, then followed and bolted the door with a click. Coffin flicked on a cel-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

light, and a feeble yellow glow spread out from him, washed over a huge shape looming in the shadows.

It was stunning, gleaming and green, like a dragon slumbering in its cave. "How did you do it?" Hawthorne breathed, putting his hand out to touch the cold, unnaturally smooth metal. A mint Mercedes tractor-trailer!

"Body's the hardest part," Lafferty said. "Most of the real ones rusted out after they were gutted. We just lucked out finding the Green Hornet here in a barn. Engines are easier — half the buildings in town still got a truck diesel somebody cannibalized to generate electricity before the government got the power net up again — such as it is. More often than not the old buggers can still turn over — with a little TLC."

"What about fuel?" Hawthorne asked.

Coffin took something out of his coat — the olive from his drink —and waved it toward the black woods of the suburbs. "Think of all those abandoned houses out there," he said, setting the olive between his teeth. The little pimiento leapt from the end like a red worm, but he tapped it back with a plump pink finger. "Just about every one has a three-hundred-gallon tank in the basement with an inch of number two heating oil sitting in the bottom — which works just fine in a diesel engine. All you need is a siphon and patience."

Hawthorne ran his modeler's fingers along the fender. "I got to hand it to you. It's quite a model."

"I'm a mechanic," Lafferty said. "I'm not interested in looks; I'm interested in making it work. I'm interested in the *idea* — what trucks *did.*

"Like carrying . . . freight?" Hawthorne asked slowly.

Neither man answered.

"You're cryptos!"

"Crypto-capitalists sell and barter *things* for profit. I deal in, ah . . . *services.* Just because the state assembly flushed private property down the can never meant people stopped having needs. And if the police can't supply them, then somebody else has to." Coffin smiled.

"Aren't you running a risk showing me this?" Hawthorne said. "If anybody knew you owned a private vehicle—"

"We picked you for the kind of guy who'd jump at a chance like this."

"To drive it myself?" Hawthorne's eyes widened.

"We're looking for a driver with the guts to handle the biggest run we've ever made."

"But the cops shoot smugglers on sight. They got these steel nets —"

"That's why profits are so high. You could be rich the rest of your life."

"If I get through."

"Think of yourself as venture capital. Every entrepreneur takes the same risks every day."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Losing my life isn't the same as you losing your money," Hawthorne said.

"Suit yourself," Coffin shrugged.

Hawthorne bit his lip. "Aren't the interstates too far gone to carry a truck? Even running deadhead, a baby like this weighs thousands of kilos—"

"You got to get off onto a shoulder every now and then," Lafferty said, "maybe take an old secondary sometimes, even ford a stream. I did it a hundred times when I had legs. Easy as pie."

"And the cargo?" Hawthorne asked.

Coffin paused thoughtfully. "People."

Hawthorne's blood chilled. "Political criminals?"

"Workers who want to get down South for decent jobs."

"In other words, illegal aliens," Hawthorne said. "That's a capital crime."

"I'm the last guy to throw away a McManhattan," Coffin said, "but if you're not interested, there're lots of other guys."

Hawthorne thought of the basement steps down to his apartment, walls gray with a century's graffiti, the painted *You Are Now On The Green Level* still legible at the foot of the stairs, the labyrinth of gypsum board partitions rank with stale cooking oil, rotting garbage. How he would stop at the end of the hall outside his own door and relieve himself, watch the steam rise from the cold concrete. Then he would go in.

No furniture except a mattress. Jess had taken everything else, including the kid. He would sit on the mattress and put his feet up from the damp, maybe study the last faint yellow traces of paint lines between parking spaces until the sudden darkness of nine o'clock powerout.

He shoved his hands into his pockets, felt the remains of his GMC Astro. What would it have been like in the old days, he thought, running his fingers along its length and closing his eyes to shrink into the cab he'd modeled. He was driving along a real highway, passing telephone poles blurred like the blades of a Japanese fan. Something flashed toward him, another truck, careening out of control. A tanker with a full deck. The last moments slowed and stretched into ponderous slow motion, filling more and more of his windshield with the other truck's cab until the jolt and release of the impact. Eight thousand gallons of gasoline spilling onto the highway, a stray spark, flames rippling across the oil lake and spindling up around the truck, his body at the center a great beacon lighting the highway for miles in every direction.

What a fine, glorious way to die, he thought.

But if he'd really lived then, would he have had the guts? Was he a modeler because things had gotten so out of hand a miniature was all you

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

could control now? Or was Jess right — was he so timid the only dreams he dared were diminished ones?

"All right," he said. "I'll do it."

The next morning he was at the Rapid stop before the first car, an old AAA map from his thruwayana collection in his hip pocket. He was already at the shed, stamping his feet and slapping his arms against the cold, when Lafferty arrived without Coffin.

"Busy with a deal," Lafferty explained, getting out his key.

"Suits me," Hawthorne said. "He gives me the creeps. I think he'd sell his grandmother if the price was right. Everything's the bottom line with him."

"He's just one of the last of the entrepreneurs. Businessmen can't afford to get bogged down with emotions." The lock snapped open, and Lafferty led the way into the darkness. But as Hawthorne's eyes adjusted to the gloom, he found not the Green Hornet, but a pathetic hodgepodge of roof flashing, boiler plate, old aluminum gutters, galvanized hot-air ducts, and stove parts, clumsily riveted and bolted together over a six-wheel chassis.

"Where's the truck?"

"Coffin wants you to learn with this," Lafferty said. "We got too much riding on this deal to risk the Hornet before you're ready."

Hawthorne peered inside the miserable hulk at the crude wooden bench and the dash. The gas gauge was a relettered clock face, the gearshift a rake handle topped by a doorknob. The idea of driving such a heap of imperfections and compromises he'd never have let pass in his own modeling. . . .

"Look, I'm offering you something the rest of those Road Kings would die for," Lafferty said. "A shot at an honest-to-God truck. This may not look like much, but it'll do anything the Green Hornet does, believe me. I built it myself. Now let me show you how the gearshift works."

"I know how a goddam gearshift works," Hawthorne said. "Don't you think I watch booktapes?"

"You know how it's *supposed* to work," Lafferty said shortly. "Actually coordinating the clutch with the shift takes *practice.*"

Hawthorne sighed. You had to compromise if you wanted something when things were so out of hand. "O.K.," he said. "Show me."

Lafferty showed him more than how to shift — how to steer out of a skid, how to use the gasohol mix to get the diesel firing before switching to the fuel injector. But they never actually turned the motor over — Lafferty said they couldn't risk being heard.

In the afternoon they rode by bicycle to scout the route Hawthorne would take.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I'll ride shotgun with you to navigate when you go, of course," Lafferty reassured him. "But if anything *should* happen to me, I want you to be able to handle it alone, at least to the city limits. From there you just follow the old Geodetic Survey maps under the seat. A baby could do it."

They pedaled past squat cinderblock warehouses and empty shopping plazas holding what had been liquor stores, Chinese and Mexican restuarants, hairdressing salons, doughnut shops, and places with signs so far gone it was impossible to tell what goods they'd traded in.

"Watch for birds," Lafferty said over a torrent of shrill cries as a flock of startled crows fled upward to the safety of the sky. "They can warn if anyone's hiding out there — almost as good as having a point car to flush out the traps before you hit them." He cleared his throat. "This bridge is out, but if you head east three streets, you'll find a sapling with a red bandanna on it. That marks the shallows where you can ford the stream. On the other side, you cut through a couple of backyards to a break in the fence where you can ease up onto the highway in sight of the bay."

"Shouldn't we actually go see it?"

"And risk getting spotted?" Lafferty said. "Past the old Ho-Jo rest area comes what's left of the old Beltway around the city."

Hawthorne had his map out. "Wouldn't it be a straighter shot to find old Route 1 to the Beltway?"

"No," Lafferty answered shortly. "That's all washed out."

"You sure? A couple club members from the Road Kings walked it awhile back. They didn't happen to invite me along that day — I must have been busy or something, but —"

"I said it's washed out. I *know* this run."

"Sure, sure, whatever you say," Hawthorne said.

They bicycled silently along the river for a stretch. Hawthorne tried desperately to think of ways to win Lafferty back. "You know," he said, "I'm almost sure that's the lake where the old man used to hunt duck, except it's just about hidden by trees now. Underbrush has really gotten out of hand, right, pal?"

Lafferty looked uncomfortable. "Far enough," he said. "You go on home and wait. When everything's right, we'll call."

Hawthorne felt a kind a desperation. "But don't I need more practice, maybe once with the motor running?"

"You afraid?"

Hawthorne hung his head. "No, 'course not."

"Then you're ready as you'll ever be," Lafferty said.

Early the third morning, Hawthorne woke to the landlady banging mercilessly on his door: a call for him on her phone up at orange level. It was Lafferty, telling him to be at the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

shed in an hour. But when Hawthorne arrived it was Coffin who met him. There was no sign of Lafferty or the Green Hornet.

"Where is he?"

"Had some business to take care of," Coffin said.

"And the Hornet?"

"He's working on it. You're going to have to make do with this."

Hawthorne felt more and more abandoned. If only he hadn't pushed Lafferty about Route 1. . . . "Then you're riding shotgun?"

Coffin let out a mirthless laugh. "Didn't Lafferty show you everything you need?"

Hawthorne swallowed hard.

"Look," Coffin said, "you got to expect a little extra expense or two when you do a job. This is your extra expense."

Hawthorne hesitated, then went back to check the chain drive to the rear wheel. He glanced up at the corrugated tin roofing of the truck's side. "What about the cargo?"

"Already locked in. Don't go bothering them, understand? Only my man at the other end opens the door."

"You're sure these aren't political—"

"What you don't know won't hurt you."

Hawthorne walked to the front, opened the poppet valve to the clearance pocket and the spark, whipped the crank around once, then a second and a third time before it caught, shaking off a spray of racketing engine sounds like a dog coming out of water. Then it died. He blushed, Coffin's face darkened. After reading about it so many times. . . . He tried again. And again. The fourth try, it was firing hot enough on the gasohol to close the clearance valve and start the fuel injector for the diesel. The thrum of the engine deepened. He'd done it. Thank God. The back of his neck was cool with evaporating sweat. He pulled himself up onto the wooden running board and slid across the bench behind the wheel feeling expansive and powerful.

"Follow the exact route Lafferty showed you," Coffin said, his lips pressed thin as he began to pull the shed doors open. "Your life depends on it."

Slowly, deliberately , Hawthorne pulled the shift lever back into first and began to let off on the clutch pedal. The truck lurched forward and died. His face and neck burned again. Why hadn't Lafferty given him more practice?

"Shit," Coffin said.

Hawthorne got out, restarted the engine, and inched out through the doors by holding the clutch half in and grinding away. He felt enormously conspicuous as he emerged into the daylight and turned left along the deserted street, but when nothing leapt out at him, he relaxed enough for the reality to sink in. He was *driving!* Driving a goddamn *truck!*. A

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

startled chipmunk darted into the underbrush, starlings rose with shrieks like rain returning to the clouds. Lafferty was right — this thing might not *look* like a truck, but it *worked* like one. If the guys back at the Road King could just see him now. What they wouldn't give to be in his shoes this moment. He even had a moment of compassion for his unseen passengers jouncing in the dark compartment behind him.

He was heading east now, the glitter of the river on his left as he topped the three residential streets to the swift brown water of the ford. Far beyond through the thickening saplings, his old man's lake shimmered in the sun. Hawthorne thought of him hidden in the hissing marsh grass watching the bobbing mallard-green heads of those clunky old decoys. Poor old bastard couldn't have fooled even a blind duck. He turned the wheel, eased the truck into the water. Old man just never had a modeler's eye. He could feel the tires sinking into the watery mud.

There was a loud *crack* from far back, a *thup* in the cargo bay immediately behind him. Something in his gut told him it was a rifle shot. A moment later there was another *crack*.

He knew intuitively that if he floored it, he might sink in the mud, slide off the shallow bar, and stall in deeper water, maybe even tip over. Desperate and frightened he fought the clutch against the accelerator. Just another ten meters. . . .

He glanced in the shaving mirror Lafferty had mounted on the door. He couldn't see anyone. Police would have been ordering him to get out by now. So it had to be other smugglers behind him — gang way! That was why Lafferty hadn't wanted to bicycle this far.

Crack—thup.

Poor helpless bastards in back, he thought. Sitting ducks. Another crack and a *blam,* and the truck lurched and sagged leftward. A bullet had blown one of the tires. Luckily he didn't need it — thank God for the four-rear design. And then he felt the truck slither up the far bank. He gunned it now, overanxious, spun his wheels, let off a little, felt the wheels catch and claw their way onto the crumbling woods road. Out of habit he sniffed for ozone as though he were back at the layout. He could see the deserted thruway flickering through the trees.

In another moment he'd found where the state's chain-link fence had been beaten down; there was a jingling as he lumbered over it, then the delicious popcorn crackle of the old tires on the pavement. He was on the thruway!

Then he remembered the poor bastards in back. If one of those bullets had hit somebody, they'd probably be too frightened to cry out or pound on the cab partition. Sure, Coffin had

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

said not to touch the doors, but Hawthorne was in charge now. He didn't have to take orders.

He eased to a stop, set the hand brake with the motor idling, and dropped to the grit of the crumbling highway. He reveled in the wealth of detail. The Club layout was too . . . clean. Not enough of the clutter of reality. When he got back he'd have to tell them.

A padlock and chain held the rear doors shut, but that wouldn't stop him. Truckers always had helped the helpless. He got the tire iron out of the cab and wedged it through the chained handle. The sheet-metal screws came off so easily he almost caught his forehead with the end of the tire iron.

The empty interior smelled of plywood and glue. A few scraps of paper and leaves, a head of lettuce rotting in its own juices. And nothing else. Not a single, solitary soul. Was this a hoax? He crackled back to the cab. He'd turn around and give that bastard Coffin such a —

But what if they were just testing him to make sure they could trust him? If he went back, he'd be giving up his chance at the full-scale life he'd modeled for so long. All right, he'd show them he could measure up.

He released the brake and felt the truck shudder as it toiled up the incline, little saplings in the cracks slapping at the truck's underside. He caught a new view of the duck lake, pulled left to avoid a bigger sapling, closing on the summit. He could even see the ribbon of the Beltway.

What the hell was that?

Something shiny gleamed from the bushes on the Beltway below, but he was momentarily distracted by the raucous caws as the sky suddenly filled with startled crows from the far side the moment he crested the summit. What had Lafferty said about birds? Hawthorne didn't want to let him down.

To the left he could see the bay, a brilliant blue plate; to the right the brown hills; and below, the Y where the ribbons of the thruway and Beltway joined. He felt his speed pick up as he started on the downside.

The shiny thing on the Beltway started to move with him. Reflections off its surface stabbed like knife blades through gaps in the foliage. What the hell could it be?

Past the rest area now, a few gutted hulks still moldering there, the faded orange Ho-Jo roof of long ago fallen in.

The thing was headed for the thruway interchange. It was a truck. He put on the air to slow so he'd reach the junction at the same time, but his foot punched all the way through like a popping paper bag, and the pedal hit the floor.

He was pushing eighty-five now, shifting lanes again and again to slow the downward descent. He thought

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of Vernon's face. What the hell would you do if you were here, you yellow bastard?

And then a flash of green swung out from the Beltway to challenge him for the lead. Except there was no Donleavy curve to force drivers to brake.

He was so lost in its beauty, like one of his own models blown up to full size, it took him a minute to realize it was the Green Hornet.

He squinted at the driver in the other truck's cab, but he didn't have to see him to know. Lafferty, deliberately avoiding his eyes, concentrating on the road ahead.

And there it was, where the crows had been startled into the air, a timber gallows whose blocks and tackle were raising something, unfolding a huge net from the pavement. A police trap. He tried his brake again. Nothing.

A decoy. A goddam decoy to spring the police trap so the Green Hornet could get through. Lafferty hadn't been a friend at all — he and Coffin had planned to sacrifice Hawthorne from the start. One of those little extra expenses Coffin expected when he did a job.

He almost gave up out of force of habit. Then the thought hit him: Had he traveled all this way, come this close, to *lose*? What were all those almosts and might-have-beens at the club except scaled-down practice for this? And where was the real skill anyway — jockeying a rig like the Hornet or keeping a bucket of bolts like what he was driving on the road?

He grabbed the emergency and pulled. There was a brief burning but no slowing. Damn. The rising net loomed closer and closer. He could see insect policemen scurrying into position to swarm over him after the net had brought him down.

Then he sensed Lafferty dropping back to let him foul in the net and clear the way for the Hornet. O.K., maybe Hawthorne would go down, but he wouldn't go alone. Instinctively he swerved, tacking the Hornet's fender just enough to make Lafferty take his foot off the brake to straighten himself out. He got a glimpse of Lafferty's surprised face through the side window. He hadn't expected a nothing to fight back.

The cops were backing away, beginning to worry what would happen if two trucks hit their net at once. But with his modeler's eye for detail and proportion, Hawthorne could see that there might be just enough room to squeeze past the net on Lafferty's side by swerving onto the shoulder.

This time, when Lafferty put on the air to drop back, Hawthorne let him, then dropped the hammer and cut fast into the right lane, catching the Hornet hard with the strap metal of his rear bumper. He hated denting such a prime model, but he had no choice. An instant later he was rocking on the shoulder, then intensely aware of the clank of the net's edge

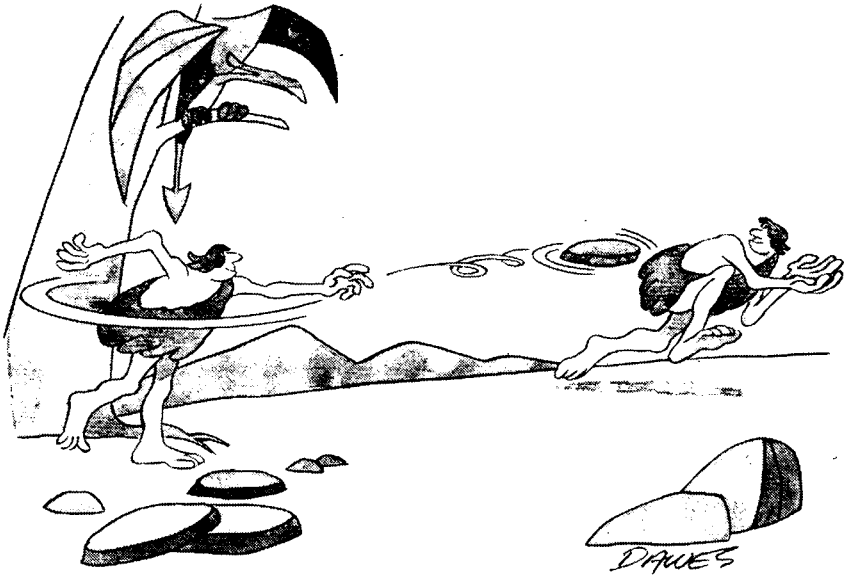
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

scraping along his truck's fender and side.

Behind Hawthorne, Lafferty saw there was no one to take out the net for him and tried to brake. He went into a skid, spun out across lanes four and five, and hit the net he'd meant for Hawthorne broadside. In breath-taking slow-motion the Hornet rolled itself over and over into a chain-link cocoon, trailing timber supports behind it like bits of twig and bark as the rig plummeted through the rusted guardrails.

Hawthorne was too busy navigating between the bridge abutments to see the huge splash of the Hornet burrowing into the glistening blue waves that drove back steadily toward the shore. He did not want to have to mourn the loss of such a thing of beauty.

Free, he was thinking. Maybe he didn't know where he was going, but he was off down a life-sized highway like those rubber-burning road kings of old, and where it led didn't matter in the least. He gripped the wheel tighter, felt the rim hot inside his palms. For the first time in his life, maybe things weren't out of hand at all.



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Fantasy & Science Fiction

MARKET PLACE

BOOKS-MAGAZINES

S-F FANTASY MAGAZINES, BOOKS. Catalog $1.00. Collections purchased (large or small). Robert Madle, 4406 Bestor Dr., Rockville, MD 20853.

SCIENTIFANTASY SPECIALIST: Books, magazines. 22¢ stamp for catalog. Gerry de la Ree, Cedarwood, Saddle River, NJ 07458.

100,000 SF and Mystery paperbacks, hardcovers, magazines in stock. Catalogs $1.00. PANDORA'S BOOKS, Box F-54, Neche, ND 58265.

SOFT BOOKS, 89 Marion Street, Toronto, Canada M6R 1E6. Howard Lovecraft, Arkham, Necronomicon, etc. bought/sold. Catalogues issued.

SEND 25¢ FOR CATALOG of Scientifantasy books & pulps. Canford, Drawer 216, Freeville, NY 13068.

HAUNTS WANTS YOU! New quarterly of horror and fantasy. Two issue trial subscription $4.50, five issues only $10.00. Box 3342, Providence, R.I. 02906.

SPECULATIVE FICTION hardcover first editions. Catalogs issued. DMK BOOKS, 22946 Brenford, Woodland Hills, CA 91364.

HAVE YOU MISSED ME? I've published WEIRDBOOK since 1968, plus other things you'll like. Get catalog and FREE sample FANTASY MONGERS QUARTERLY (stamp appreciated). W. Paul Ganley, Publisher, Box 149, Buffalo, NY 14226.

FOREIGN EDITIONS OF FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION. Copies of French, German, Spanish, Japanese and Swedish editions available at $2.50 each, three for $7.00. Mercury Press, Box 56, Cornwall, CT 06753.

SCIENCE FICTION/FANTASY Catalog, O-P 1st Edition Hardcovers. OTHERWORLDS, 23834 Wendover, Beachwood, OH 44122.

HARDCOVER SCIENCE FICTION, FANTASY. Reasonable Prices. Free Lists. Norman Syms, 8 Broadmoor Vale, Upper Weston, Bath, Avon, England BA1 4LP.

SCIENCE FICTION COLLECTION. Free Catalog. Low Prices. Rudy's Books, 8041 Port Royale Dr., San Diego, Ca. 92126.

OUT-OF-PRINT Books Found. Send Wants. SF/Occult Catalogues $1.00 each. Booklook, 51F Maple Ave., Warwick, NY 10990.

SCIENCE FICTION/FANTASY. Free catalogs of pulps, digests, paperbacks, hardcovers. Collections also purchased. Ray Bowman, Box 5845F, Toledo, Ohio 43613.

SF BOOKS AND MAGAZINES for sale. Free lists. Jauvtis, 6 Sala Court, Spring Valley, New York 10977.

AUTHORS. Publisher seeks short stories for upcoming SF anthology. Previously unpublished authors considered. Submissions to Cherryable Brothers, Dept. 14, 130 Seventh Street, Suite 448, Garden City, N.Y. 11530.

PULPS, HARDBOUNDS, DIGEST, AND now paperbacks. 15,000 items. Complete sets of almost every digest and pulp magazine. Send $1.00 for new catalog with reduced prices. FSF, If, Fantastic, and Galazy: $50/100 issues plus postage from 1965-85. Graham Holroyd, 19 Borrowdale Dr., Rochester, NY 14636.

PULPS, HARDBOUNDS, DIGESTS, AND now paperbacks. 15,000 items. Complete sets of almost every digest and pulp magazine. Send $1.00 for new catalog with reduced prices. FSF, If, Fantastic, and Galaxzy: $50/100 issues plus postage from 1965-85. Graham Holroyd, 19 Borrowdale Dr., Rochester, NY 14626.

1000's of SCIENCE FICTION, HORROR, OCCULT paperbacks, hardcovers. Free catalog. Lamira, Box 12093, Dept. 86, Baltimore, MD 21281.

Do you have something to advertise to sf readers? Books, magazines, typewriters, telescopes, computers, space-drives, or misc. Use the F&SF Market Place at these low, low rates: $15.00 for minimum of ten (10) words, plus $1.50 for each additional word. Frequency discount: 10% for six consecutive insertions, 15% for twelve consecutive insertions. Send copy and remittance to: Adv. Dept., Fantasy and Science Fiction, P.O. Box 56, Cornwall, CT 06753.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

SCIENCE FICTION/FANTASY. Free Catalog. New hardcovers, paperbacks, all at up to 20% discount. Nova Winds, The Maildrop, Box 271, 55 McCaul St., Toronto, Ontario. Can. M5T 2W7.

BUSINESS OPPORTUNITIES

INVENTIONS, IDEAS, TECHNOLOGY WANTED! Industry presentation/national exposition. 1-800-528-6050. X831.

CLOTHING

F&SF T-SHIRTS. Navy blue with original magazine logo imprinted in white OR: Red shirt with blue logo. Sm, med, large, extra-large. $7.00 each. Mercury Press, Box 56, Cornwall, CT 06753.

MISCELLANEOUS

ESP LAB. This new research service group can help you. For FREE information write: Al G. Manning, ESP Lab of Texas, Box 216, Edgewood, TX 75117.

HALLEY'S COMET cloisonne pins, tees. Pinboys, Box 71663-SF, LA, CA 90071. $1/SASE=Catalog/Gift!

20% OFF FANTASY GAMES and miniatures. Send $2.00 for illustrated catalog, refundable. The Fantasy Apothecary, Box 19302, Orlando, Florida 32814.

HALLEY'S COMET TIE TAC or Stick Pin. Four color enamel and beautiful. $6.95 postpaid. Schneider, Box 64, Teaneck, NJ 07666.

How to live with someone who's living with cancer.

Nobody knows better than we do how much help and understanding is needed. That's why our service and rehabilitation programs emphasize the whole family, not just the cancer patient.

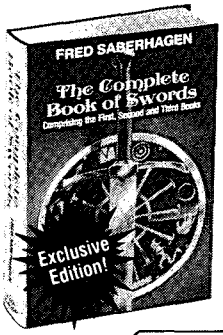
Among our regular services we provide information and guidance to patients and families, transport patients to and from treatment, supply home care items and assist patients in their return to everyday life.

Life is what concerns us. So you can see we are even more than the research organization we are so well known to be.

No one faces cancer alone.

AMERICAN CANCER SOCIETY®

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



YOURS FREE
WITH MEMBERSHIP THE COMPLETE BOOK OF SWORDS

12 swords of power are loose in the world. Giant 3-in-1 volume includes the First, Second and Third Books.

1800 Spec. ed.

1818 Pub. ed. $12.95

2048 Pub. ed. $15.95

2055 Pub. ed. $16.95

1909 Pub. ed. $16.95

1974 Pub. ed. $14.95

1693 Pub. ed. $18.95

2089 Spec. ed.

1784 The Space Merchants; The Merchants' War. Comb. pub. ed. $25.90

0943 Another Fine Myth; Myth Conceptions; Myth Directions; Hit or Myth. Spec. ed.

0075 The First 5 Amber Novels. 2 vols. Comb. pub. ed. $32.30

2022 Doctor Who and the Deadly Assassin; Doctor Who and the Face of Evil; Doctor Who and the Robots of Death. Spec. ed.

And take 4 more for $1 WITH MEMBERSHIP

SEE OTHER SIDE FOR ADDITIONAL SELECTIONS

How the Club works:

You'll receive your choice of any 4 books for only $1 (plus shipping and handling) and a free copy of *The Complete Book of Swords* after your application for membership is accepted. We reserve the right to reject any application. However, once accepted as a member, you may examine the books in your home and, if not completely satisfied, return them within 10 days at Club expense. Your membership will be cancelled and you'll owe nothing. The FREE book will be yours to keep whether or not you remain a member.

About every 4 weeks (14 times a year), we'll send you the Club's bulletin, *Things to Come*, describing the 2 coming Selections and a variety of Alternate choices. In addition, up to 4 times a year you may receive offers of special Selections, always at low Club prices. If you want the 2 Selections, you need do nothing, they'll be shipped automatically.

If you don't want a Selection, prefer an Alternate or no book at all, just fill out the convenient form always provided and return it to us by the date specified.

We allow you at least 10 days for making your decision. If you do not receive the form in time to respond within 10 days and receive an unwanted Selection, you may return it at our expense.

As a member you need buy only 4 books at regular low Club prices during the coming year. You may resign any time thereafter or continue to enjoy Club benefits for as long as you wish. One of the 2 Selections each month is only $4.98. Other Selections are higher, but always much less than hardcover publishers' editions—up to 65% off. The Club offers more than 400 books to choose from. A shipping and handling charge is added to all shipments. Send no money now, but do mail the coupon today!

Note: Prices shown are publishers' edition prices.

SCIENCE FICTION BOOK CLUB®

Dept. AS-498, Garden City, N.Y. 11530

I want the best SF in or out of this world! Please accept my application for membership in the Science Fiction Book Club. Send me the 4 books whose numbers I have indicated in the boxes below plus my FREE book and bill me just $1 (plus shipping and handling). I agree to the Club Plan as described in this ad. I will take 4 more books at regular Club prices in the coming year and may resign any time thereafter. The FREE book will be mine to keep whether or not I remain a member. SFBC offers serious works for mature readers.

FREE BOOK #1420	1.	2.	3.	4.

Mr.
Ms. _____
(Please print)

Address _____ Apt. # _____

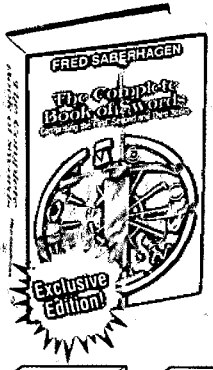
City _____

State _____ Zip _____

If under 18, parent must sign _____

The Science Fiction Book Club offers its own complete hardbound editions sometimes altered in size to fit special presses and save you even more. Members accepted in U.S.A. and Canada only. Canadian members will be serviced from Canada. Offer slightly different in Canada. 26-S018

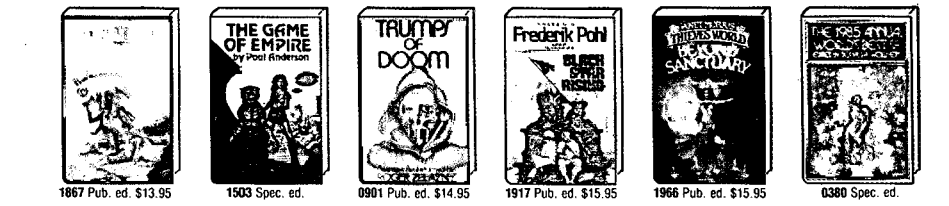
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



YOURS FREE WITH MEMBERSHIP THE COMPLETE BOOK OF SWORDS

12 swords of power are loose in the world. Giant 3-in-1 volume includes the First, Second and Third Books.

1883 Pub. ed. $17.95 | **1487** Spec. ed. | **1743** Pub. ed. $16.95 | **1933** Pub. ed. $18.95 | **0109** Pub. ed. $16.95 | **1362** Pub. ed. $14.95



1867 Pub. ed. $13.95 | **1503** Spec. ed. | **0901** Pub. ed. $14.95 | **1917** Pub. ed. $15.95 | **1966** Pub. ed. $15.95 | **0380** Spec. ed.

THE HARPER HALL OF PERN
MICHAEL MOORCOCK THE ELRIC SAGA Part I
THE ELRIC SAGA PART II
ALAN DEAN FOSTER
The Tera Adventure
THE TRUE GAME

0992 Dragonsong; Dragonsinger; Dragondrums. Comb. pub. ed. $38.85

0752 Elric of Melniboné; The Sailor on the Seas of Fate; The Weird of the White Wolf. Spec. ed.

1172 The Vanishing Tower; The Bane of the Black Sword; Stormbringer. Spec. ed.

★**1925 Spellsinger; The Hour of the Gate; The Day of the Dissonance.** Spec. ed.

0869 Dinosaur Planet; Dinosaur Planet Survivors. Spec. ed.

1495 King's Blood Four; Necromancer Nine; Wizard's Eleven. Spec. ed.

AND TAKE 4 MORE FOR $1

WITH MEMBERSHIP

See other side for coupon and additional Selections.

SCIENCE FICTION BOOK CLUB®

26-S018

★ Explicit scenes and/or language may be offensive to some.

Note: Prices shown are publishers' edition prices.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED